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THE RED SOMBRERO RANGERS

OR,

Redfern's Last Trail.

The Romance of the Boy Trailer, and Companion
Story to "Blue Jacket Bill."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BLUE JACKET BILL," "THE SCAR-
LET SOMBRERO," "THE RIVALS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG FUGITIVE.

"HUGH HAMMOND, you shall hang for this!
"You have killed him!"

The one who gave utterance to the threaten-
ing words was a young and beautiful girl of
sixteen.

ON HE RODE STRAIGHT FOR THE BURNING BUILDING, TO SUDDENLY DRAW REIN WHEN
- A HUNDRED FEET AWAY.

She was dressed in a riding-habit, and her horse was hitched near.

The scene was a country school in a dense forest, the hour verging upon sunset, and the locality on the eastern shore of the State of Maryland.

At her feet lay the prostrate form of a youth scarcely nineteen, gasping for breath from a bullet-wound in his side, and near him was a squirrel-rifle, just discharged.

Standing near, with a rifle clutched tightly in his hand, was a young man of twenty, and to him the threatening words of the young girl were addressed.

"Nonsense, Ethel; it was a fair, stand-up duel," he said.

"It was a cruel murder, for now I know that Gray's rifle had no bullet in it, for you drew it out to-day."

"No, no! you shall hang if he dies, and, my God! I fear there is no hope for him!"

The young man started and turned deadly pale now, while a look of terror spread over his face.

Governed by an impulse beyond control as he gazed upon the prostrate form, and then caught the determined expression of the young girl, he turned and fled, mounted his horse, and dashed away from the fatal spot.

Like the wind his horse sped toward a distant hill, whereon stood a handsome mansion.

Dashing up to the stable he dismounted, rushed into the mansion to the library and going toward a desk that stood there he said:

"I must take it, or I am lost."

He opened the desk, grasped a roll of bills, took other things from a small box, and sought his own room.

"My father will be furious, but better that I take his wealth than his son be hanged on a tree, for that girl will hang me."

"Oh! how I have loved her, and though I have my revenge on him, she drives me away in terror of my life."

"I must be off, or she will come to my father to arrest me as the judge of the district, and he will do it, yes, he would not spare even his own son."

With a number of things put in a pair of saddle-bags, the youthful fugitive from a judgment he had brought upon himself, went out, mounted the best horse in his father's stables and rode away in the gathering twilight.

He did not spare the animal, but kept at a sweeping gallop mile after mile.

Late at night he arrived at a village upon the Tred-Avon River, and putting up at the inn learned that a schooner was to sail from there the following morning for the West Indies.

He drove a good bargain with the landlord of the inn for the sale of his horse, and before noon the following day stood upon the deck of a large schooner which was leaving the waters of the Tred-Avon astern, as it sped down the Chesapeake toward the blue Atlantic.

He had engaged passage for the island of Cuba, and with the shores of his native land dropping out of sight, his reckless nature became cheerful, the shadow of the gallows no longer fell upon him and he ground a curse between his teeth against the boyhood rival at whose heart he had aimed his bullet, first securing his own safety by extracting the bullet from the weapon of his victim.

CHAPTER II.

A RECKLESS ADVENTURER.

ALONG an unfrequented highway, in the sunny land of Mexico, a horseman was riding one pleasant afternoon, several years after the flight of Hugh Hammond from his home, driven away by the threat of the maiden he had madly loved, boy though he was in years.

The horseman's face was darkly bronzed, and he wore a sombrero and the costume of the country.

He was well mounted, and if armed showed no weapons.

His face was a handsome one, his physique superb, and about him there was the reckless, indifferent air of a man ready for any emergency.

So changed was the boy of twenty, in the three years which had passed since his duel with his rival, Gray St. John, at the old school-house in Maryland that few, if any one could have recognized him.

"Halt, señor! no one travels this trail without paying toll!"

The command, and what followed came from some one at first invisible among the mesquite trees that bordered the road, but there was a

rifle muzzle only too plainly seen peering out into the face of the horseman, and a moment after a man stepped out before him.

A quick glance of the horseman over his shoulder revealed to him a second man in the trail in his rear, so he accepted the situation cheerfully and said in excellent Spanish:

"There is an old saying, señor, that you cannot extract blood from a turnip, and if you can find anything of value about me it is more than I have been able to do for some days."

"You are cool about it, señor, to say the least," muttered the man.

"There is no need of a heated discussion over nothing," was the response, with a smile.

"Who are you, señor?" and the man, eyed him closely, while three others of a like kind came out of hiding and gathered about the horseman.

"A poor devil with whom the world is at odds, for I am moneyless, friendless and out of work; but what little I have I'll share with you if you demand it."

The men looked at each other, and then the leader said:

"Well, señor, you are just the kind to take with men of our profession, for we admire your style."

"Then perhaps you can give me a job?"

"Well, yes, if you like the work."

"I prefer to be strangers to work, but then a man must not starve, and the world owes us a living, you know."

"That is just what we think, and we can give you a job if you like it?"

"As gentleman, cowboy or cut-throat?"

"Which do you prefer?"

"The former of course, while I would turn to herding if I had to, and throat-cutting is not so bad if one gets well paid for the work."

"Bravo, señor, you are more and more after our style."

"May I ask if you are gentlemen, cowboys or cut-throats, or mayhap you are soldiers, for I notice that you wear the remains of what once was a uniform."

"We were soldiers, señor, but have given up cutting throats for the Government at a few pesos a month, to do so for ourselves at a very fair profit upon a small investment."

"Senors, I am glad to know you, for I was meditating upon the subject of blood-letting for gold, when you rudely awakened me from dreams of future wealth."

The four were again looking at each other significantly.

In all their experience they had never met one just like the horseman who so coolly confronted them.

If there was sarcasm in his words they failed to detect it, and mastered by a strong mind the leader said:

"Well, señor, you are not the man we were looking for, but we are glad to have met you."

"You are not a Mexican in spite of your good Spanish."

"I am a citizen of the wide, wide world, amigo."

"If you wish my horse and outfit, and demand it at the rifle's muzzle, it is yours, and I will go on my way on foot."

"If you wish my life you must fight for it, while if you desire neither, pitying my poverty, unless you have something to propose I will bid you adios and go on my way."

"Senor, we have something to propose, for your brains and our weapons will enrich us all."

"We were soldiers, señor, belonging to the Lancero League of Colonel Eldoro, the richest man in Mexico."

"As I said, we prefer to soldier for ourselves, so discharged ourselves from the colonel's regiment, and took to the road."

"Business has not been as good as we could wish, so we decided to waylay the colonel on his way to his hacienda, where he goes every two weeks or so to see his beautiful daughter."

"He always has a well-filled purse, and carries jeweled gifts to his daughter, so we were waiting for his coming when you appeared in sight, and we thought you might have money also."

"Appearances are deceitful, my friends, in my case; but this is a good plan of yours indeed, if the colonel is not a desperate man to handle."

"Oh, we know him well, and he seldom carries a pistol loaded, and depends upon his sword."

"He will deliver when we make the demand."

"See here; I have a plan to get far more."

"Name it, señor."

"You complimented me by saying I could be the brains of the party?"

"Yes, señor."

"Well, you halt this Colonel Eldoro, rob him,

and then let me come in sight, charge upon you and accomplish his rescue."

"You will fire, but not at me, and I will fire, but not to hit you, and you escape with your booty."

"The colonel will invite me to his hacienda, and as a guest there I can arrange a plan to rob him so that we can enrich ourselves."

"Or better still, you might be demanding of him an enormous ransom, see, when I come to the rescue."

"What do you think, amigos?"

There was but one opinion, and that was expressed in a bravo for the reckless adventurer, who then arranged the plot against the Mexican colonel, so that there should be no mistake, and the villains took positions to carry it out.

CHAPTER III.

TREACHERY.

COLONEL CORTEZ ELDERO was a dashing commander of Lanceros, still some years under fifty, very handsome, immensely wealthy, a widower with one child, a daughter of seventeen, whose beauty, added to her being an heiress, made her a reigning belle in society.

The colonel was popular with the fair sex and the idol of his soldiers, while he was utterly fearless, and few men cared to force a duel upon him, for at that time dueling was the gentlemanly way of settling difficulties in Mexico.

Stationed some dozen leagues from his magnificent home, a palatial hacienda, surrounded by thousands of acres, the colonel was wont to go twice a month to visit his daughter there, who was under the charge of competent governesses for her instruction.

He had laughed at the idea of taking an escort of Lanceros, had not thought of danger to himself, and seldom went with his pistols loaded, little dreaming that he would ever be halted on the highway, though he was wont to say, when asked, what he would do if confronted by bandits:

"Throw them my purse if the odds are against me, and if not, ride over them."

The colonel was within a league of his home, almost upon his own lands, and was riding leisurely along, when he passed through a ridge of rocks which caused him to remark:

"What a place for highwaymen to ambush one!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when two men stepped into the pass before him, two behind him, all with rifles leveled, faces masked, and a determined air that showed that they felt that they held the game in their hands.

"Halt, Señor Colonel, if you value your life!" came the stern order.

The reins were upon the neck of his horse; he did not know whether his soldier valet had loaded his pistols or not; his sword was in its scabbard, and a glance showed the Mexican colonel four against one, and their rifles leveled.

The colonel took it coolly, however, and replied:

"I value my life, of course, so buy it with this," and he tossed his purse upon the ground.

But the men did not stoop to pick it up, and the leader said:

"You have some jewels, colonel, purchased for your daughter."

"Ah, now I know you as deserters from my command, so of course you are posted."

"You demand the jewels, too, do you?"

"Yes, my colonel."

"Take them!" and drawing a red morocco case from his saddle-pocket, he tossed that also upon the ground.

"Now, colonel, you wear a valuable ring, and a watch and chain, which we also want."

"The ring is my signet, and the watch and chain was presented by my regiment, as you unworthy scamps should know, so I'll give you their value."

"How can you?"

"In any way that you say."

"We'll take the valuables now, and return upon receipt of cash."

"Might be right, so here they are," and he handed his ring, watch and chain to the leader of the bandits, who thrust them into his pocket and said:

"That is not all, Señor Colonel."

"What more?"

"You are valuable to us, so we will hold you a prisoner until our demand for ransom is paid."

"Ah! that is your game, is it?"

"Well, name your price."

"Twenty thousand pesos."

"See here, villains, I have handed you all I had of value about me, but I will not be robbed of a small fortune."

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"You will write us an order on your bankers for the sum, and you will remain a prisoner with us until it is paid, or—"

"Or what?"

"We'll take your life," was the determined response.

"I am at bay, men, and I'll fight for my life before I yield it to a lot of coward cut-throats," and the colonel whipped out his sword like a flash.

But just then a horseman dashed into view.

"Oho! in trouble, señor!" he called out, and he dashed upon the scene, a revolver in each hand.

Then came several sharp reports, cries of terror as two of the bandits dropped, and the other two who had fired without result upon the rescuer turned to dash away when one of them was cut down by a blow of the colonel's sword.

But the fourth bounded over the rocks into the mesquite bushes, and though hotly pursued by the stranger, made his escape.

As he gave up the chase, with a bitter malediction, and returned to meet the officer, he found him standing in the trail brushing the dust from his purse and morocco case of jewels which he had taken from the dust, after having turned the pockets of the dead bandit wrongside out and recovered his watch, chain and ring.

"Señor, I owe you my life, for those devils would have murdered me."

"I am Cortez Eldoro, Colonel of Mexican Lancers, but you are a stranger to me, señor, and if I mistake not, in Mexico."

"Yes, Señor Colonel, I am an American, traveling for pleasure in your beautiful land, and my name is Hammond Hughes, and I congratulate myself upon having been of service to you."

"I claim you for my guest, señor, so come with me to my hacienda a league away, and I will send men to bury these dead bandits."

Thus met Colonel Eldoro and the youth whom a young girl's threat had made a fugitive from his own land.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOLF IN THE FOLD.

THE hacienda of Colonel Eldoro had been the home of his ancestors for half a dozen generations.

Beautifully located, for it stood upon a hill rising out of a rolling prairie, with mountains in the background, it had been built of stone, and fashioned more after a castle of olden times than the house of a Mexican.

There were forests about it, flower gardens, lawns and fruit trees without number.

An outer wall surrounded the hacienda, and in the rear, overhanging a swiftly flowing stream, were the outer buildings of the ranch.

Cattle by thousands roamed the prairies under Mexican cowboy guards, there were droves of ponies and many other evidences of the great wealth of the gallant colonel of Lancers.

Within the hacienda proper, which occupied over an acre of ground, were large halls, sitting-rooms, a library, art gallery and a score of bed-chambers.

There was a plaza with fountains and flowers, and a promenade upon the roof with several towers as points of observation.

It was to this house, Buena Vista, that Colonel Eldoro took his new-found friend, the man to whom he believed he owed his life, for he had felt that the four bandits would kill him in the struggle he had made.

The man who had come to his rescue against such odds won his admiration and respect and he felt drawn toward the handsome stranger by the kindest feelings.

He saw in Hammond Hughes, as he had called himself, only a gentleman of wealth and leisure, fond of adventures and wandering alone through a foreign land dangerous in the extreme for a stranger to venture in.

The stranger had told him that he had traveled for years simply for pleasure, possessed moderate means, and no home ties, so roamed through the world as suited his humor best.

He spoke Spanish well, was educated, witty, a brilliant talker and the colonel was delighted in having found such an acquaintance, and intended to keep him a guest as long as he would remain.

Arriving at the hacienda, the guest was shown a most charming room, and the colonel bade him rest until supper.

But Hammond Hughes, as I shall call him, did not seem fatigued in the least.

He gazed from the different windows out upon the plaza upon one side and the varied scenery from the other views obtainable from his chamber.

"A very magnificent house!"

"A vastly rich man he must be."

So he mused to himself.

Then he began to regard his chamber.

It was luxuriously furnished, the walls were hung with pretty paintings, and all about it was an air of refinement.

As he turned again to the window and gazed out over the cattle-dotted prairies toward the distant mountains, he mused aloud:

"Well, that was a master stroke of mine indeed."

"I am sorry that one of those four rascals escaped, but he will hardly dare to report me."

"And if he does, it will be simply his word against mine."

"He is a cut-throat, I an American gentleman."

"What a good thing it was those scamps took me at my word as being a poor vagabond, and did not search me."

"Egad, they'd have gotten a cool five thousand in Mexican bank-notes."

"If I'd have met the colonel I could have ordered him to stand and deliver, and it would have paid me well."

"But rescuing him will pay me far better."

"Yes, he is the richest man in Mexico, and his daughter is an heiress."

"Well, I've knocked about and seen hard times, but I've learned much of men, and I have been high up the ladder and down at the bottom round."

"Fortunately, my last gambling venture won me money enough to play the gentleman here for awhile, until I can win a larger stake—in an heiress."

"Well, as the rescuer of her father, I start in with flying colors."

And so the daring adventurer mused on until time to make himself presentable.

The colonel himself came to the room after him, and led him to the plaza, where Senorita Dolores awaited them.

As she arose to greet the stranger, he beheld the most beautiful creature before him upon whom his eyes had ever before rested.

A form above the medium height, slender, graceful and perfect in outline, while her face, with its rich olive complexion, was radiantly lovely.

"I am so glad to meet you, Señor Hughes, to thank you for saving the life of my father, for he has told me all."

"I owe you a debt of gratitude, señor, that I can never repay; no, never."

She had, in her impulsive way, taken both of his hands in hers, and looked straight up into his handsome face.

He replied pleasantly, and said that it was sheer love of adventure which had caused him to go to the rescue, and he was the one to be grateful in having made thereby two such friends as her father and herself.

The evening passed delightfully to all, for the guest had a voice of rare melody, and sung many songs of his own land, accompanying himself upon the guitar most skillfully.

When at a late hour he retired to his room, he muttered in a determined way:

"The Senorita Dolores shall be my wife—I swear it!"

CHAPTER V.

DOUBLY A TRAITOR.

"SEÑOR, a word with you."

The one addressed was a horseman who had halted at a spring to water his horse.

The water gurgled out of a narrow pass, with rugged rocks on either side, and the horse had just raised his head after drinking, and his rider taken the reins to turn away, when the words fell upon his ears.

By sheer force of circumstances he listened to what was said to him, for a rifle covered his heart!

The rifle peered over a rock, not ten feet from him, and down the pass to the spring, so to dash by was impossible.

The horseman knew that he was at the mercy of the one who said so quietly a second time:

"Señor, a word with you, if you please."

"Well, be quick with what you have to say," was the stern rejoinder.

"There is no hurry, señor, and you must listen, though you are a rich American gentleman, and I only a poor Mexican bandit."

"A bandit, are you?"

"Yes, señor."

"Then you wish my purse?"

"No, señor, I wish for more."

"You'll get no more."

"I am in a position to command, señor."

"You have me under the muzzle of your rifle, so could kill me, no doubt."

"I do not wish to kill you, señor."

"Ah! you are kind indeed; but may I ask what your intention is?"

"To go into partnership with you."

"In what business, may I ask?"

"Money-making."

"And who is it that I am to have for a partner, for I do not recall having met you before."

"I supposed your memory was better, Señor Hughes."

"You know me, I see."

"Very well, señor, so I will introduce myself as Felipe Soto."

"I am just as ignorant now as before."

"Our last meeting may recall unpleasant memories, señor; but it was only a league from this spot, and I had three other comrades with me then, who are now sleeping under the shade of the mesquites."

"Still I do not recall you or your comrades."

"What a memory you have, señor, or rather lack of it."

"Now I was sure that you would recall having been stopped by four mountain toll-gatherers, and escaping from robbery upon the plea that you were a wandering vagabond, while your pockets were really heavy with gold."

"You then entered into a plot with us to rob Colonel Cortez Eldoro."

"It was a splendid plot, señor, but went wrong from the fact that you got us to unload our weapons of ball, for fear we might hit the gallant rescue, and you also did the same."

"But you reloaded your pistols again, and the rescue was not a mock one, but a real one, for my three comrades were killed and my fleet heels and the close proximity of the mesquites saved me."

"Now, señor, after over a year I have returned to this part of the country to visit you."

"I am now the poor vagabond you professed to be, while you are the rich señor, the husband of the most beautiful woman in Mexico, and heiress to her father's immense wealth."

"So, señor, I claim a handsome allowance from you."

"I wish to turn honest, to get me a ranch and some cattle, and live in comfort, and I will be then as silent as the grave."

"If you do not get the hush money?" quietly asked Hammond Hughes.

"Well, I shall entertain the colonel and your wife with a very pretty story, and get an amnesty for what I will have to tell."

"They will not believe you."

"Señor, I have better proof than you think."

"Your word against mine."

"No, señor, that would not be sufficient, I admit, for I am a deserter from the colonel's regiment, and a bandit, or have been, rather, for I have partially reformed."

"Well, let me know your proof."

"I was, before becoming a soldier, señor, a detective of the Government in the city of Mexico."

"I killed a man under circumstances where the Government had to protect me, and so I went on the list as dead, and joined the Lancers."

"But my badges and papers as a detective I have, and when you turned traitor I held them to be revenged upon you."

"I dogged you so well, señor, that I know your career since your coming to Mexico."

"I have not been idle in the months that have passed, and I know that you landed in Mexico with a band of smugglers, and have been a card-sharp and adventurer ever since, while a ranchero who left Vera Cruz in your company having a large sum of money with him, was found dead, and his gold gone."

"Señor, as a supposed detective, I have papers for the arrest of a man answering your description."

"And more, señor, I have deposited duplicate papers and a full confession of my own, in the hands of a priest, who will act promptly, if aught should happen to me."

"Understand, señor, that you had better trade with me than the priest, for I am open to a proposition."

"See, señor, I have won my game with you, so don't be unreasonable."

Hammond Hughes had listened with a sinister smile to all that the Mexican had said.

He was waiting for a weak point at which to attack him, hoping to catch him off his guard.

He had made up his mind that this man should die.

But when the bandit told him that he had let a priest into his confidence the expression upon

the adventurer's face changed, and he turned very pale.

He saw the trap that he was in, and he knew now that he must come to terms, so he said quietly:

"Well, if your price is not too high we may trade."

CHAPTER VI. THE COMPACT.

FELIPE SOTO was a finished villain.

He intended making a bold strike for gold, but he meant to have it so, in case of his death, that his revenge would come, even though he was in the grave.

So he took into his confidence a priest, handing him a sealed package, in which were the names he did not make known.

If he died these names were to be made public, and Felipe Soto would have the satisfaction in his dying hour of knowing that he had arranged for his revenge.

"Senor, you are wise, and we will have no trouble, I know."

"See, I trust you perfectly, and we can talk matters over amicably."

The adventurer made no reply, and dismounting from his horse, led the way to a place some distance off, where no one who might go to the spring would see them.

"Now, what do you want, Felipe Soto?"

"My wants are not extravagant, senor, and I will state them."

"There is a ranch up on the Rio Grande that I have taken a fancy to, and I can buy it, with several hundred head of cattle and two-score ponies, for, say ten thousand pesos."

"Your price is too high."

"Now I thought that moderate, senor."

"I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Yes, senor."

"I'll buy you the ranch and stock, or give you the money to do so."

"You are so good, senor."

"Then I will give you an equal amount in gold to have you do some work for me."

"Agreed, senor."

"You do not know what it is."

"It matters not, senor, I will do it."

"Suppose it is to take a life?"

"Now, senor, do you think I'd hesitate to take a life which was worth ten thousand pesos to me?"

"There must be no mistake?"

"There shall be no mistake, senor."

"It must be done in a peculiar way."

"Ah! maybe it's the beautiful senora, your wife?"

"Villain!" hissed the adventurer.

But perfectly unmoved Felipe Soto continued:

"Not the senora? Then it must be the Senor Colonel Eldoro, for she is his sole heir."

The American's face changed color at this, and he said in a low tone:

"What if I said it was the colonel?"

"It would make no difference to me, senor, no more than if it was the senora."

"Would you kill a woman?"

"Don't tempt me by offering big money, senor, or you'll find out that I would."

"Well it is not my wife."

"But her father?"

"Yes."

"He holds the purse-strings too tight, senor?"

"Yes, and his will leaves every peso to her, nothing to me."

"I understand."

"If he dies, she is his heir."

"Yes, senor."

"And I fear he may change his will so as to cut me off from the management which as the will now reads the law would give me."

"I can see how that is, senor; he is not as friendly with you as he was."

"Well his daughter married against his will, for he had already pledged her to a man who is rising in fame and riches every day."

"I see."

"But as she loved me he yielded and we were married just one year ago."

"You made quick work of it, senor, and I congratulate you; but how long do you think the colonel should yet live?"

"He is consummating more speculations now which will pay him enormously, and it will be several months before they can be in a condition that would not be hurt by his death."

"Say in five months, senor."

"About that time, or when I need you I will write for you."

"Yes, senor; but have you thought how it is best to be done?"

"Catch him upon one of his visits home, and instead of halting him, kill him, rob him and go."

"And my pay?"

"I will bring it to you as soon as I can get away after the affair."

"I guess it will be safe, senor, for you'd lose all if you forgot to pay me, and more, if you played me false I'd hang you if I had to hang to do it."

"I'm revengeful, senor."

"I will not play you false, but instead pay you handsomely, as in time I may have other work for you to do."

"I am your man, senor; but when do I get my ranch?"

"Go there from here, and I will follow within a few days, for I must raise the money in some way first."

"I understand, senor, so here where is you will find me," and the man hastily wrote a few words in Spanish and handed the paper to the American.

Soon after they parted, and Hammond Hughes rode slowly homeward.

As he rode he mused to himself after this fashion:

"Well, I must get rid of the colonel, and if he is shot and robbed by a bandit no suspicion will fall upon me."

"He will not change his will for six months yet, for I heard him tell Dolores he would only do so if he found out that I was not the man I had represented myself to be, as some of my disappointed rivals have asserted."

"Dolores trusts me implicitly, and when her father dies, I can manage her property."

"If she puts the check-rein on me, why I shall simply have to get rid of her."

"And of her baby boy?"

"Well, he must die in infancy, that is all, for then shall I be master of all, and not until then."

"I am glad I met this Felipe Soto, for he can do what I intended to do."

"But I must find out who this priest is, for after Felipe has done my bidding he must also go the way of all flesh, and in a way that the priest shall suspect nothing."

"As for the priest, I must get those papers from him, by fair or foul means, and then I will have no trouble to enjoy the grand fortune I am plotting for."

And a few minutes after he entered the rooms of his beautiful wife and gave her a loving greeting, also bestowing a kiss upon the baby boy held up to him by the proud mother.

And against these two the man was plotting death, for their death made him the possessor of a vast fortune.

CHAPTER VII. THE PLAN OF THE ASSASSINS.

"SENOR, I am ready for the work."

It was nearly a year after the meeting of Stanwood Hughes and Felipe Soto at the spring, a league from the Eldoro Hacienda, and the speaker was the Mexican who had come to keep his pledge for gold, and remove the gallant colonel from his sphere of usefulness.

He came in response to a letter received from the adventurer, and the two, according to an appointment made, met again at the old rendezvous.

"Well, I am ready to have the work done, Felipe Soto, for the colonel is growing more and more bitter toward me for some reason, and I overheard him tell my wife the last time he visited the hacienda, that he should change his will, leaving every dollar to his little grandson, Elroy, and place it in the hands of guardians for him, while she would be paid a liberal allowance, but, in case of my death, all should be as it was before."

"I at once wrote for you, and he is to come home on next Saturday, but I learned to-day he was to bring a priest with him as his guest, and I fear this may spoil our plans."

"No, senor, if I kill him in the presence of the priest, there will be better proof that bandits did the deed."

"True, if your hand does not fail you in the presence of the padre."

"It will not; but, senor, I have a plan."

"Well?"

"It would seem better to have two men."

"It would."

"So I brought a comrade with me."

"Ha! you let him into the secret?"

"Not exactly, senor; but he knew enough to cost him his life, for he began to demand more pay, and we quarreled."

"Well?" asked the adventurer, in a startled way.

"Oh, I shot him."

"When?"

"Half an hour ago."

"My God! this will spoil all!"

"No, senor, it will help us, for he is wounded, mortally, but will live until to-morrow."

"Now you be my comrade, disguising yourself in his outfit, and I'll do the shooting and kill the colonel, though both of us can fire upon him."

"I'll rob him while you cover the padre with your rifle, and then we'll retreat."

"A few moments after you dash up upon your horse, the padre will tell you the story, and you go in pursuit."

"Come straight for the cliff, which I will show you now, and my comrade will be dead by then, but if not I can finish him."

"His horse and mine will be there."

"I'll place him in position and all that, and you ride back to tell the padre that you killed one on the cliff, and the other as he stood on the edge, and he fell over into the river, and was washed off by the foaming torrent."

"The two horses will be there to prove your story, with the dead body, for I'll make my escape on foot, as it will be safer for me."

"Of course it will be the one who fell over the cliff who had what treasure there was taken from the colonel, and so all will work smoothly."

"See?"

"Yes, I see that you are the most perfect villain that it was ever my pleasure to meet."

"I am proud of knowing you, Senor Felipe Soto."

"Ah, senor, you flatter me."

"No, I assure you that I am proud of you."

"And my plot?"

"Is perfect."

"You agree?"

"Indeed I do, my dear Felipe."

So it was arranged, and the trio went to the cliff, where the dying comrade of Felipe Soto lay, a wound in his head.

The situation was taken in thoroughly, and while Hammond Hughes returned to the hacienda for the night, Soto remained near the dying man until the morrow.

"Hammond, some of the hacienda people reported seeing two suspicious-looking men on the trails yesterday, so will you not ride to meet my father, to-day, as I have real anxiety about him?"

So said Dolores, more beautiful as a married woman than as a maiden, and she came into her husband's room and leant over and kissed him.

"Certainly, Dolores, if it will relieve your anxiety I will go."

"You are so brave, my husband, I have no fear of danger for any one when you are near."

"It is so good of you," and Dolores's words made the man shiver; but hiding his emotion, he said he would prepare for his ride, and an hour after rode away from the hacienda alone, for he declined to take an escort, as his wife asked him to do.

Nearly two years had they been married, and poor Dolores was not as happy as she had hoped to be.

There was a mystery about her husband which she could not understand, and though he professed to love her, yet she feared that another love had claimed his heart before he met her.

Her father, for reasons he kept from her, had come to doubt her husband more and more, and the two were little more than friendly, but Dolores always took the side of Hammond Hughes, for she could see no harm in him, except that their little boy was not the idol of his heart as he was of hers.

Hammond Hughes rode away from the hacienda and kept his appointment with Felipe Soto.

"How is the wounded man?" was his first query.

"He must have known we needed his body, senor, for he died ten minutes ago," was the unfeeling reply.

"Well, rig me up as quickly as you can, for we must be in plenty of time."

They put masks on them, and the adventurer further disguised himself, after which he took in the situation about the cliff, the body of the dead Mexican was placed in position, as though just slain, and the hiding-places of the two horses noted.

Then while Felipe Soto went on foot, the adventurer rode to a spot where he tied his horse, not far from the scene of ambush.

Taking their positions among the rocks in the pass, they quietly awaited the coming of the noble man whom the base American had willed should be assassinated to enrich him.

CHAPTER VIII. THE AMBUSH.

"THERE they come!"

It was Felipe Soto who spoke, for his well-trained ears detected the sound of hoofs.

"There are but two, and I feared there might be more," he added, a moment after.

"Better have your rifle ready, señor, for if mine *should* miss fire all is lost."

"Yes, I shall fire when you do," was the reply of the arch traitor.

Soon after two horsemen came in sight.

One was Colonel Eldoro, in his brilliant uniform, and mounted upon a spirited steed.

The other was a padre in his robes, and he rode a quiet-going nag, the slow pace of which seemed the fret the restive horse at his side.

They were talking earnestly as they came on, and the colonel was heard to utter the name of his degenerate son-in-law.

Just then the two rifles flashed, though there seemed but one report.

The bullet pierced the brain of the colonel, and he dropped dead from his saddle, while his startled horse bounded on, wheeled and went back upon the trail.

The priest, in dismay, threw himself from his saddle and knelt by the dead soldier, unmindful of danger to himself, and the warning words:

"You are covered, padre, and shall have his fate if you resist."

"It is not for a man of my calling to resist even an assassin accursed. Murderers, look at your red work!" and the priest pointed at the form of the dead colonel.

"I shall do more than look, padre, I shall search the body for gold," was the reply of Felipe Soto, and the priest waved him back, when the muzzle of the adventurer's rifle was thrust into his face and he heard the words:

"Don't throw your life away, padre, for we will have our way."

The priest uttered no word, and Felipe Soto searched the body, taking the purse, watch, chain, ring, and some presents for the daughter and little grandson of the dead man.

Then the two robbers backed off and disappeared, followed by a bitter anathema from the priest.

They had been gone but a short while when the clatter of hoofs was heard, and the priest, who was trying to discover if a spark of life remained, turned as a horseman dashed up.

He instantly called out:

"Oh, Señor Hughes! is it your wife's father!"

"They have killed him!"

"Who?" came in a voice of thunder as the adventurer drew rein.

"Two bandits!"

"How long since, and whither did they go?"

"Hardly five minutes, it seems, and they went up the trail."

"I will pursue them," and on the adventurer dashed.

Soon after, the priest was startled by hearing half a dozen shots in rapid succession, and after the lapse of a quarter of an hour, back came Hammond Hughes.

"Holy Father, I have avenged him at least."

"My poor, dear Colonel Eldoro—my best friend?" and his voice quivered as he knelt by the dead soldier.

Then he told how he had overtaken the bandits, killing both, though one had gone over the cliff.

He urged the priest to go on to the hacienda, break the sad news to Senora Dolores, and send aid to him, for he would remain with the dead.

The priest mounted his staid old horse, which was greatly surprised at the pace he was put to, while the adventurer paced to and fro musing to himself:

"Curse the fellow! he suspected me, and so saved his life by getting the drop on me."

"But for that I should have killed him, and thus wiped out any witness to my act in this affair."

"But I forget that he has a full confession in a priest's hands."

"I must find that priest, whoever he be, and get those papers, and then kill Soto."

"The colonel is gone, and Dolores is sole heir now to all his vast wealth, and not a shadow of suspicion can fall upon me."

"No, I am safe, and I will be the richest man in Mexico, and a hero, too, for, having killed the assassins of my respected father-in-law," and the wicked man laughed in a bitter way at the clever ruse they had played, he and Felipe Soto.

Still he was not altogether happy, for he had gone to the cliff intending to really kill his comrade in crime, but had found that worthy fully confident that he would do so, and from his perch behind a rock he covered the adventurer, coolly told him that he knew his purpose, and said:

"Now, señor, empty your revolver rapidly, so

the priest can hear the hot fight raging here, and then go back and tell your story."

"You have your proof, the body of my comrade, and the horses."

"But, remember, all in good time I shall expect a visit from you with the amount of money demanded."

"See?"

"I'll come," was the response, and Hammond Hughes dashed away.

An hour after the departure of the priest, a party arrived from the hacienda, and while some bore the body of their loved master home, others went with Hammond Hughes to the cliff and saw the result of his *heroism*!

No search was made further, for it was believed that both bandits had been slain, and the body of one was hastily buried, while their horses were led to the hacienda, whither the "new master" had gone at full speed as soon as he had shown the men the result of his supposed attack upon the outlaws.

He winced as he met the embraces of his wife, while her lamentations for the dead were mingled with praise of her husband.

"You have avenged him, Hammond; but, ah! how fearful our loss!" she cried.

The colonel was carried to the tomb of his ancestors, followed by his regiment, and the representatives of many other commands.

It was a grand funeral, and one long remembered, and the deepest sympathy was felt by all for the mourning daughter, while admiration for her handsome husband filled many hearts.

And over back in the hacienda the will of the dead colonel became known, and a bitter curse was ground between the teeth of the assassin as he learned that the will had been changed, and all was left to the little grandson, with guardians to take charge of the estate, and an ample allowance for Senora Dolores.

But, in case of the boy's death, all came back into the possession of Senora Dolores, the will read, and through his shut teeth came the threat of Hammond Hughes:

"I will not be foiled, for *the boy must die.*"

CHAPTER IX.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

ONLY by the whiteness of his face and lips, did the assassin show his extreme disappointment when the will of the colonel was made known.

He saw that he would be regarded critically by the priest, Padre Almada, who was with Colonel Eldoro when he was killed, and the others present, as this act of the Mexican officer implied distrust of his son-in-law.

So he accepted the situation cheerfully, and made up his mind to win over his wife completely to his influence.

He was not a man to despair.

He had played for a high stake in marrying Dolores, and had won.

In getting possession of the stake, he had lost the first game, but there were two more games yet to be played, and he must win one or both of them.

He realized now that he would need the services of Felipe Soto in the affair, and to gain them he must pay the ten thousand pesos he owed him for the last work done.

To do this he had not a thousand pesos to his name.

Had the old will of the colonel remained he would have had no trouble; but the last one left him with no means of getting the money.

He had his living upon the estate, and such allowance as his wife would give to him from her share, which was liberal; but for the year's income he could not raise ten thousand pesos.

She could not sell cattle from the various ranches of the estate, as the guardians of the child only could do so, and they were to pay her the income coming to her quarterly, while she had command of the hacienda and its servants as full mistress, excepting the right to sell anything.

But the colonel had left her full possession and powers, heirless to all should her child die.

This was an unfortunate clause in the will, as it left the life of the boy dependent in a manner upon the guilty American adventurer.

But Colonel Eldoro, in the nobleness of his nature, had not believed it possible for a father to take the life of his own son to gain gold.

The manner of Hammond Hughes toward his wife changed at once to the greatest devotion, and his child became his idol.

He was wont to carry the little fellow with him on horseback, riding about the ranch, and he devoted himself most faithfully to his amusement.

He would sit in his wife's pretty rooms by the hour, where he had before preferred the seclusion of his library, and his manner toward the servants became kind and gentle, where before it had been stern, often harsh.

The result was that Dolores loved him more and more, and her increased happiness in her husband's society softened her grief at her father's death.

Little Elroy became so devoted to his father that he fretted when not with him, and certainly life seemed like happiness unalloyed in the hacienda of Eldoro Ranch.

Some weeks after the death of the colonel a letter came for "The Señor," as Hammond Hughes was called, bearing the American postmark.

It related to some property of his in Texas, which needed looking after, and the settlement of taxes.

He at once handed it to his wife who said promptly:

"I have some thousands of pesos, Hammond, which are at your service."

"No indeed, I thank you, my sweet wife, I have ample for all emergencies, and I shall leave an order to sell the place when I go."

"Are you going there, Hammond?"

"I must, for you know I am not rich, and cannot afford to lose valuable property."

"Oh, if father had only left his will differently, then all I had would have been yours."

"But I have seen among his papers, Hammond, letters which spoke of your past career."

"They were from various sources, and gave no signatures, yet they impressed him deeply I am sure."

"But when will you go, my husband?"

"In a couple of days, *cara mia.*"

"And how long will you be gone?"

"A couple of weeks, perhaps a trifle longer."

"Oh! how Elroy and I will miss you."

"But you are sure you do not need any money?"

"No, indeed, my sweet wife, for I have some four thousand pesos I have never had to touch," was the answer, and the man at the time had not as many hundred.

"I have even more that is at your service, if you wish."

"No, no; I will not need it," was the reply.

That night, when the Senora Dolores was sleeping soundly, a form stole into her room and bent over her for a long while.

At last the form turned from the bed, and the odor of chloroform filled the room.

The light was then turned up, and from a secret drawer in a cabinet a key was taken which fitted into a panel in the wall.

This was opened and revealed a closet in which were a number of drawers and little boxes.

Over these the midnight intruder looked until he drew forth a necklace of diamonds, two massive bracelets, a comb studded with the same precious gems and a pair of earrings, immense solitaires.

They were thrust into a pocket, the panel locked, the key returned to its hiding-place, and the white-robed form glided out of the room.

The next morning "The Señor" was awakened by a servant, with the information that her mistress was quite ill.

He hastened to her rooms to find her suffering with an intense headache and nausea; but he administered some medicine and she was able to join him at dinner that day.

The following morning, mounted upon the best horse in the Eldoro stables, and equipped for a long journey, The Señor rode away from the hacienda, after his wife's tearful good-by, and started upon his trip to Texas.

CHAPTER X.

THE PRICE OF LIFE.

FELIPE SOTO was passing as an honest man.

He had purchased a very desirable ranch over on the Río Grande, which the owner would sell for cash only.

It had a comfortable house upon it, fairly well furnished and half a hundred acres of land under cultivation, while there were several hundred cattle that bore the owner's brand.

Felipe Soto had thought that the brand strangely resembled a gallows; but this did not deter him from paying his money down and becoming master, though he determined to re-brand his cattle, taking a horseshoe as an emblem of good-luck to counteract the effect of the other.

The owner told him, after the sale had been consummated that the brand had been made to represent a gallows, a warning to cattle thieves not to steal his stock.

Senor Soto then became a resident and the neighbors flocked to pay their respects, charmed with a man who could pay cash down so large a sum for the ranch.

One afternoon as Senor Felipe Soto sat on his piazza smoking, he spied a horseman coming toward his ranch.

"It is the Senor Hughes.

"He is wise not to delay longer," he muttered.

It was Hammond Hughes, and soon after he dismounted and was cordially welcomed by the newly-pledged ranchero. After supper the two talked together earnestly, and the adventurer told Soto of the colonel's will and added:

"Now I have some property in New Orleans, so go there to dispose of it so as to pay you the price agreed upon.

"I shall return by here and pay you the money, and then I have another proposition to make to you, Soto."

"I am open for all propositions, senor, to make money," was the reply.

So the next morning early Hammond Hughes departed, and hardly had he gotten out of sight when a man started upon his trail.

The man was Felipe Soto.

In due time the adventurer put up at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans, and on the same day an old gentleman secured an adjoining room to him.

The aged gentleman was such only in appearance, for in reality it was Felipe Soto, an adept in disguising himself.

He dogged the adventurer to the shop of a dealer in jewels, and after his departure he entered the place and had a long talk with the diamond merchant.

Then he returned to the hotel, and the two men left the next morning for Mexico.

But when the adventurer arrived at the ranch of Felipe Soto that worthy was there to meet him.

"Well, Soto, I sold my property to pay you, though I did it at a sacrifice."

"I am sorry, senor; but you'll soon be able to make it up in some way."

"I hope so, and it is upon that subject I wish to talk with you."

"I am ready to listen, senor, as soon as I have seen the color of your gold."

With this hint the American paid over the money gotten for the jewels he had stolen from his wife, and Soto said:

"You seem to have a snug sum over, senor."

"I have a couple of thousand pesos, or so."

"You count badly, senor, for those three outside notes in your roll of bills are one thousand each, for a glance showed me that."

"It is not all mine, Soto," sharply said Hughes, and then he continued:

"Now, Soto, I have told you how the colonel's will reads."

"Yes, senor."

"If the boy dies, his mother gets all."

"I understand, senor."

"And that is the same as my getting it."

"Certainly."

"Now you are handy at killing?"

"Rather."

"You don't mind who it is?"

"Not if the gold outweighs my scruples of conscience, senor."

"Well, the boy must die."

"Yes, but how much is his death worth to you?"

"Ten thousand pesos."

"Not enough."

"Fifteen."

"No."

"What do you demand?"

"You will get millions, and I only ask twenty-five thousand pesos, payable in five installments, within one year after the death of the boy."

"Agreed."

"Give me your written statement to that effect, and I'll do the work."

"Is not my word good?"

"No, senor, I do not trust myself, so am not expected to trust another man."

"Very well, I'll give it to you; but the boy must die in a way to create no suspicion."

"Certainly."

"But how?"

"There is a river near the hacienda?"

"Yes."

"Does the nurse ever take the boy there?"

"Yes, often, to the arbor on its banks."

"Then the nurse must be surprised, thrown into the river with the boy and both drown."

"Their bodies will be found, and it will be believed that the boy fell in, and the nurse, in trying to rescue him, lost her own life."

"Soto, you amaze me, and are my teacher in villainy by long odds.

"I will become an adept in crime under your tuition."

"Don't flatter me, senor; but you like my plan?"

"Excellently well, and you can carry it out in your own good time, after I have been back home a month or two."

"Depend upon me, senor," was Soto's response.

The next morning the planter started for the home which he had planned to destroy.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BITER BITTEN.

"THE death of her child will prostrate her, and she will go into a rapid decline I am sure."

"My devotion will cause her to leave me all, and possessed of such wealth as I then will be I can return to the United States and live like a prince."

"Fortunately now I did not kill Gray St. John that day at the school-house, as I believed I had done when I fled."

"If I had done so, I would not dare go back and resume my name as I will do."

"But I shall have my revenge in a secret way, and once I have removed Gray St. John from my path, I will make the proud Ethel my wife, and ah! how she shall suffer for casting me off and taking him instead."

"Ha! ha! I see before me riches, power and revenge!"

"Hands up, senor!"

The laughed died away on the lips of Hammond Hughes, as he heard the ominous command, and his face became deadly pale.

He had been musing as he rode along, his thoughts brought up by nearing the hacienda after his visit to Felipe Soto.

He had reached the spot where Colonel Eldoro lost his life, and not dreaming of danger to himself, he yet was anxious to ride quickly by the fatal locality, for bitter enemies hovered there.

But suddenly he heard the ominous words to halt, and a quick glance showed him that from over the rocks and among the bushes peered the masked faces of half a dozen men, and their long rifles were aimed at his heart.

He was a brave man, but life was dearer to him than gold, so he wisely obeyed the command, while he said:

"Well, I obey, so what is your will?"

"Your weapons first, senor," said a masked robber, stepping into the trail.

"Is not my purse more valuable?"

"After your weapons, senor."

"Quick, for my men are impatient."

"Well, take them."

The robber obeyed, and he was careful not to leave a weapon secreted anywhere.

"Now, your purse, senor."

"Here it is," and the adventurer handed it to him.

"Rather well filled, but you have more."

"No."

"I say yes."

"Only my watch and jewelry."

"Yes, we will have those, too, but you have more money."

"Not a peso, for I have just returned from a long and expensive journey of weeks."

"Yes, and it was rumored that you had gone to dispose of more of your American property, so we want the money."

With an oath the adventurer took out a package of bank-notes and handed them over.

"More yet, senor."

"No, not another peso."

"So you said before, but I will take a search for the balance."

"No, I will give you all I have without your touching me."

"There, now you have robbed me of seven thousand pesos and my jewelry."

"And your weapons, senor."

"Many thanks, for you can ride on your way now."

"Yes, now that you have fleeced me."

"Pretty well, I admit, senor."

"It is strange you do not take my life," sneered Hammond Hughes.

"We prefer your gold just now, senor; but go on and do not tempt us."

The man put spurs to his horse and dashed away, hurling back the threat:

"I'll have men on your track who will demand your lives within the hour."

The robber leader laughed, and then pocketed his robberies.

Then he went up among the rocks and gathered together a number of masks, black sticks with holes in the end to make them look like rifle barrels and sombreros.

These he threw into a bag and walking rapidly soon came to where a horse awaited him.

The hoofs of the horse were muffled so as to leave no track, and fastening the bag to his saddle he mounted and rode away.

After having gone a league, to a well-worn trail he took off the mask he wore and the face of Felipe Soto was revealed.

Also taking the muffers from the hoofs of his horse he rode on at a sweeping gallop until night coming on found him leagues away from the scene where he had so cleverly headed off his companion in crime and robbed him of the balance of the money he had gotten for the jewels of Senora Dolores.

In the meanwhile the adventurer had reached the hacienda his horse covered with foam, and, after a hearty greeting to his wife and little son had told how he had been halted by half a dozen armed men, at the very spot where Colonel Eldoro had been killed, and robbed of a vast sum which he had received for his American property which he had sold.

The ranch people were at once called in by the alarm bell and led by Hammond Hughes in pursuit, and a thorough search of the spot was made.

But no tracks of horses could be found, and it was concluded that the robbers had been on foot.

The cowboys, some thirty in number, spread throughout the country and a thorough search was made until nightfall, but, as the reader well knows, without any trace of the alleged half-dozen outlaws being found.

So the hunt was given up, and Hammond Hughes returned to the hacienda to receive the sincere sympathy of his beautiful and devoted wife in the very large loss he claimed to have met with, while the devotion of the husband to her made her heart beat most happy.

But with the greater devotion of the man to his wife and son, the coil of the serpent was infolding them the more surely.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW FALLS.

IT was a beautiful spot upon the river banks, where there was a rustic cabin and about it many things to amuse and entertain a child.

Half a league away was the hacienda of Eldoro looming up grandly from its site on the hill, and a pretty drive-way led from the house to the river.

A miniature pony was hitched to a tree near a sober-looking mustang mare, and upon these the nurse and her young charge of two years had ridden to the spot for an afternoon of sport.

The boy was precocious for his years, and rode his pony well, when Papita his nurse held the rein, while he loved to sit upon the tank and fish, though he was wont to yell lustily for aid when he caught anything.

Papita was a model nurse, ever ready to answer and instruct her charge, who in his third year would run about at a lively pace and shout out his little commands with considerable vehemence.

Papita idolized her little master as though he were her own child, and seemed only happy when with him.

They were seated upon the steep bank together, the boy fishing, Papita half asleep not far away, when a man stole softly up among the rocks and gave the little fellow a shove.

With a cry the boy fell into the river, and the man sprang back out of sight.

A wild shriek came from the nurse, and in her terror she bounded into the stream after her charge, though she could swim but indifferently.

Just then the man dove from the rocks, and when he came up was within arm's reach of the boy, whom he grasped.

"Save the young senor, and do not mind me!"

They were the last words of the faithful nurse, as she sunk from sight.

Coolly the man proceeded to obey, swimming with a bold stroke down the river, the child in his arms.

"Poor Papita!" cried the boy, but the man swam on, going toward the other shore steadily, as the current swept him down toward the distant rapids and shallows.

Glancing back he saw the uplifted arms of the woman, and then they disappeared.

"I did not do it, and I am glad," he muttered through his teeth, as he swam on.

At length he reached the shore, gained a landing and plunged up the steep side of a lofty range.

The boy began to beg piteously for him to go

back to "poor Papita," but he said in a kindly tone:

"Yes, little senor, I'll take you home."

At last the summit of the ridge was reached, and there a horse awaited.

All dripping as he was the man mounted, and holding the boy in his arms rode on at a rapid pace.

He did not slacken his speed even at nightfall, and for several hours held on until he came to an adobe hut in the mountains.

A woman heard the hoof-falls and stood in the door.

It was a peon woman, and she said, politely:

"Have you the child, senor?"

"Yes, Francesca, here he is and asleep."

"Take off the clothing he has on, and put on him what you prepared."

"After he has forgotten do as I told you and the gold I promised is yours."

"I will obey, senor, but do you go on to-night?"

"Yes, at once!" and as the woman took the child the man rode on.

It was Felipe Soto.

He had had his orders to act from Hammond Hughes, and he had obeyed, but *only in part*.

And at the Eldoro Hacienda?

As the shadows began to lengthen "The Senor" began to grow strangely anxious about his boy.

He went to the window of his wife's room, and looking out toward the river said anxiously:

"Why does not Papita return, Dolores?"

"She will soon."

"Where did she go?"

"Toward the river, for Elroy is so fond of his gallop on his pony, and catching a fish delights the little man above all things."

"I wish Papita would come, for I feel anxious about the boy whenever she goes to the river."

"Papita swims, you know, and she is so careful; but really, Hammond, you do look pale and worried, so I will send after them."

She called for her maid, and a servant from the stables was dispatched at once for Papita.

He went off at a gallop, Hammond Hughes sitting in the window watching him.

He saw him enter the timber, and tried to talk calmly to his wife, who laughed at his fears.

Then he sprang to his feet, and cried:

"He is coming back at the full speed of his horse, and alone!"

"My God! can harm have befallen my beautiful boy?" groaned Dolores, and springing to the window she dropped upon her knees before it while her lips parted in prayer.

The man went to another room and returned with a glass.

"He is spurring his horse desperately."

"Oh, Dolores, what has happened to our boy?" he cried.

But the beautiful woman uttered no response, and her lips moved only in prayer for the safety of her child.

Toward the hacienda dashed the horseman, halting a moment at the adobe wall, and as he neared the house, from the window rung the voice of Hammond Hughes:

"What word do you bring of my boy?"

The man halted beneath the window and cried:

"The horses are there, senor, but they are not to be found, and—"

A shriek of despair came from the mother, while the man called to her maid to help him revive her, for she had fallen forward in a swoon.

Couriers were sent for a physician and the priest, and then Hammond Hughes rode off with a party of men to the timber.

There was the little senor's gold-embroidered sombrero, his whip, and the fishing-rod of Papita half-drawn out upon the bank.

Papita's horse and the boy's pony stood hitched under the trees, but the riders were missing.

The search was kept up for days, and at last, bruised and lodged against the rocks in the shallows, the body of poor Papita was found, and buried decently, for it was felt that in trying to save the young master she had lost her life.

But the tiny form of the little senor the river did not give up; it had not lodged among the rocks of the shallows, but had drifted on to the sea—it was supposed!

CHAPTER XIII.

UNVAILED.

WHITE-FACED and wan-looking, Dolores at last arose from the bed where her life had so nearly ended.

For two months she had lain ill with brain fever, after the truth dawned upon her that she had lost her darling boy.

All through the long illness of his wife The Senor was a most devoted nurse.

His devotion and self-sacrifice had been the talk of all at the hacienda, and he had received the sympathy of every one.

He seemed happy indeed when his wife recovered, and urged her to go with him, as the physicians ordered, for a change of scene.

A sea voyage was taken, and Dolores returned after six months strong and well, but with her heart still heavy with grief.

Back to the old scenes she came, and only the devotion of her husband had saved her life, all said, and she believed it.

Whether it was that the coming back reminded Dolores of her loved dead, her father, her boy and Papita whom she had been deeply attached to, for they had been children together, certain it was that she soon began to look ill and pale again.

One day a padre called at the hacienda and asked to see her.

It was the Padre Aldama, and he was a priest from the Rio Grande country.

He asked to see the Senora Hughes, and was admitted to the pretty sitting-room where she passed most of her time.

The Senor was away, hunting, but returned a few minutes after the arrival of the priest, and as he reached his own room heard him greeted by his wife.

He was about to enter the room, but words he heard checked him, and knowing that his presence was unknown, he concealed himself behind the folds of a curtain and listened, and he heard that which made his knees tremble and his face become pallid, while he had to shut his teeth hard to prevent them from clicking together as with a chill.

"My poor senora, I have come to see you upon an errand which will wring your heart with pain."

"Be brave, be strong, and hear all that I have to say."

So said the priest, and with a low moan Dolores replied:

"Little can give me deeper pain than what I have suffered, holy father."

"My child, let me tell you the whole truth."

"I knew your father well, and a noble man he was."

"I am known in the church as Father Aldama, but my name was Aldama Soto."

"I have a brother who went to the bad from boyhood, and he now lies at the point of death, and it was by him that I was sent to you."

"Do you remember, when away from home on your travels, your husband left you in San Antonio for a week?"

"I do, father."

"Well, it was at that time my brother was shot down by an assassin, who sent for him to come to him, and believing he had killed him, he left him lying where he fell."

"But Felipe, my brother, did not die, and was found and taken to a place where he was well cared for."

"He sent for me and I went to him, and when he was able had him removed to my home."

"But he began to fail and made his confession to me, and my God! what a confession it was from human lips."

"I am to make known to you that confession, and as it deeply concerns you, my poor woman, I will tell it to you, for so Felipe would have me do."

"Nerve yourself then to hear the bitterest tale of wrong and sorrow, cruelty and inhumanity ever poured into a woman's ears."

Then, in a low, earnest tone, the priest told of the stopping of Hammond Hughes by the bandits, and the story he had told them of his poverty, with his compact to aid them [rob Colonel Eldoro.

After that came the plot against the colonel, his death at the hands of the American, for Felipe said that he had put no bullet in his rifle, and only one hit the colonel.

Then the priest handed over the watch and jewelry of Colonel Eldoro, which Felipe Soto had kept most sacredly.

The visit of the American to Felipe, to pay the money he had agreed upon, his being tracked to New Orleans, where he sold the jewels stolen from her to a dealer in gems, and Felipe's visit after him, and demand that the man should keep them until called for, all was told, with the plot to destroy his own son.

Felipe confessed that he had followed and robbed Hammond Hughes, and handed to the priest the jewelry of the American as proof.

And more he gave the letters of Hammond Hughes to him, with the written pledge to pay twenty-five thousand pesos, after the assured death of the infant son of Senor Dolores.

Like a statue sat Dolores listening to all.

She could not grow whiter, and her face could not become more rigid than it was.

She heard yet did not move, and the priest told how his wicked brother had gone to the river and hurled the boy over the bank, while Papita had sprung after him.

Then he continued:

"With a cry my brother bade me leave him and come at once to you."

"He could say no more, and I was glad to come, so left him with one whom I could trust to care for him, and came to you to tell you all, that your husband married you for your gold, killed your father to get it, and thwarted by the will, hired my brother to take the life of the little senor, your son and his."

"Then he sought to put my brother out of the way, and God grant that he has, and I am sure that your failing health is the secret of his threat to Felipe, to remove you by slow poison, for he hesitated to tell him nothing as he expected to silence his tongue in the end."

"Such is my cruel story, my poor child, and here are my proofs in full, and Heaven have mercy upon you."

A silence of some minutes followed and then Dolores said in a low voice that was hushed in its suppressed emotion:

"Father, you have opened my eyes, and unmasked the man I call my husband."

"He must die by my hand!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VAILED LADY.

THE Padre Aldama was frightened at the look and words of Dolores. Had she burst into tears, or mourned, he could understand it; but her heart seemed to have turned to stone.

She uttered the threat in a manner that told the priest she meant to keep it; then she arose and glided into her husband's apartments.

A short stay and she returned with a bottle without any label.

"This is what he gives me each night before I retire, as he said, to make me strong again, but I have been worse ever since I took it. What is it, holy father?"

The priest looked at it, inhaled it, and said:

"The deadliest of poisons, madame!"

"Now to my jewels, for I have not opened the case since my father's death."

She took the key from its secret hiding-place, opened the secret panel, and then the jewel-case.

It was empty!

"Yes, he stole them, as you said, and your description of them, as told you by your brother, is perfect."

"It is getting dark now, father, so I will have lights brought, as my husband must soon arrive, and I will receive him here—Ah, Anita is bringing lamps now, and the maid of Dolores entered the room."

"Anita, when my husband returns, bid him come at once to my rooms."

"Yes, senora; but I thought he was here."

"Has he returned?" quickly asked Dolores.

"Yes, senora, over an hour ago, and he came here, I thought."

"Anita, go at once and find him," and the girl was startled at the voice and manner of her mistress.

But, soon she returned, and made report:

"Senora, Pedro says that the senor returned to the stables, mounted his swiftest horse and rode away half an hour ago."

"My God! He has heard all, and has escaped, and in the darkness we can never track him."

"Quick, Anita! Order every man on this ranch to arm himself and go in chase of Senor Hammond Hughes, for he must be found."

"Quick! obey!"

Anita sped from the room and then, turning to the padre, Dolores dropped upon her knees before him, raised her hands and said in a voice that rung through the room:

"Holy father, upon my knees before you, I vow to vail my face from all human kind until I have tracked to his grave that man who murdered my father and my child."

"Register my vow on earth, holy father, as it is registered in Heaven!"

The priest fairly shuddered at her awful vow, while she sprang to her feet and left the room.

All through the night the cowboys scoured the prairies, hills and mountains in search of the fugitive.

But the morning came and no trace of him was found.

At last his trail was taken and followed to the river, but there it was wholly lost, and the disappointed horsemen returned with their report.

The priest had met the Señora Dolores in the morning and found her robed in deepest black, while an impenetrable sable veil concealed her face so securely that even the color of her hair could not be seen, and her hands were also gloved.

"I have sent a courier to the City of Mexico, holy father, informing him that a scout brought in news last night that the Indians were upon the eve of rising and telling the Government that I will protect the frontier here with my people, while I have claimed my right of a captaincy in the Mexican Army and asked permission to serve as such."

"You, señor?"

"Yes, father, for one of my ancestors, by his great courage, won a rank which was to be an heirloom in our family, descending through generations."

"Nothing was said as to there being no male heir, and as I was the only child of Colonel Eldorado, I claim the rank, and will get it."

"Then I shall organize my people into a company of Lanceros, for you know my life in camp with my father has made me a very good soldier, and with the hacienda well fortified with a few cannon I can defy the red-skin foes, or the bandits who sometimes raid along the frontier."

"It will keep me from thinking, father, and enable me to do much that I have an intention to do."

The worthy priest listened with dismay, and urged all in his power against the course of the Veiled Woman.

But she was firm, and soon after he returned to his dying brother, wondering if it had not been better for him to have let the law deal with Hammond Hughes, rather than tell all to poor Dolores.

Some days after his departure Dolores received by a messenger a letter from him which read:

"Poor, sinful Felipe died just after my return, but though he heard me say that you knew all, he could utter no word."

It was some weeks after that Father Aldama received a letter from Dolores, which was as follows:

"I have my commission, and am known as the Lady Captain of Lanceros."

"My good people are as devoted as they can be, and my company not only formed, but I led them against the Comanches two days ago, and beat them severely."

"I have repeated my vow in my prayers, and some day you will hear that I have kept it."

"Until then to all I shall remain ever

"THE VEILED LADY."

CHAPTER XV.

THE LITTLE CAPTIVE.

A SMALL party of Mexicans, a dozen in all, consisting of men, women and a child, were on the march toward the Rio Grande River.

They moved slowly, and their outfit was not a rich one, yet it seemed all of their earthly possessions.

At night they camped in the chaparral, through which a small stream wound its way, and one guard was put on watch.

The guard leant against a tree and went to sleep, sunk into a slumber that was his last, for he neither saw or heard a form creeping toward him.

Suddenly the form arose, and a hatchet fell with deadly force upon his head.

With wild yells there sprung from the shadows then two-score of painted Indians, and relentlessly they rushed upon the little camp.

Men and women, awakened from their slumbers, fought with desperation for their lives, and a few savages fell.

But the fight was a one-sided one, and short-lived, for the Comanches soon were masters there.

The dead lay about where they had fallen, and their scalps had been taken by the victors, who danced about in mad glee.

All were dead—with one exception!

That exception was a boy of four.

He was not so dark in face as the people who had been with him, and there was a look about him as though he was not of their blood.

The woman whom he had called mother had seemed very devoted to him, and she guarded him with a jealous eye, while she was wont to address him as Roy.

She lay dead upon the ground, and the boy

sat near regarding her, half with horror, half with sorrow.

A chief had warded off the blow of a brave, and had taken the little boy as his special captive.

He seemed surprised to see that the child did not shrink from him, or cry out in terror, and he spoke to him kindly—as kindly as he would to one of his own children.

The little fellow seemed to have won him over at once.

The booty to be obtained from the little train was taken by the braves and packed upon the horses, while the wagons were burned, and shed a red glare around, making weird and strange pictures.

The little boy regarded it all calmly, and at last as the savages mounted to ride away, leaving the dead bodies as food for wolves, the chief called to him, and placed him behind him upon the back of his pony.

And like grim specters the red riders rode away in the darkness.

It was a long, hard ride back to the village of the red-skins, but the little captive stood it well.

He ate the food given him with seeming relish, appeared impressed with his captors, and watched them with interest and a silence that caused them to wonder.

The Comanche village was reached, and the men, women, and children rushed out to greet the victors.

The little captive looked on with the same calm eyes, and was taken to the tepee of the chief and given into the keeping of his squaw.

She was a comely Indian woman, hardly over twenty, and having no children of her own, when the chief told her that the boy was to be his pale-face son, she drew him toward her and embraced him.

Then the little fellow's arms went up and were put around her neck, while he went into tears.

The chief looked on with surprise, but smiled and rode away to care for his horse.

From that day the little captive became known as "Little Brave" the pale-face son of Mad Panther the great young chief of the Comanches.

Several years went by, and the boy of four had grown into the lad of seven.

He spoke Comanche as a native, and was as thorough a little Indian as any red-skin boy of the village.

He could shoot a bow and arrow, throw a lance and ride a mustang better than any Indian lad of twelve, while he could, and would take his own part when imposed upon, in a way that delighted Chief Mad Panther, and his Indian mother, who had become strangely fond of the little pale-face captive.

His hair had grown long, reaching to his waist, and his red mother, by adoption, dressed him in the best buckskin, handsomely beaded and embroidered with porcupine quills stained brilliant hues.

He had learned to snare birds, rabbits and wolves, and had killed wolves with his bow and arrow.

Mad Panther taught him to trail, and was surprised to see how quickly he learned.

But the Comanches had been raiding the settlements of late, and had extended their expeditions across the Rio Grande into Mexico.

One night Mad Panther and his braves returned from a successful raid, and the village was wild with joy over the scalps taken.

But the joy soon ended, for the gallant Texan Rangers were upon their trail, had crossed the river in the night, and dashed like an avalanche upon the village.

The scene was one never to forget, and the Rangers killed mercilessly, driving the women, children and braves to flight in the mountain recesses.

Mad Panther had fought like a tiger, but fell dead at the door of his own tepee, while his wife sunk by his side and an arrow pierced her heart.

No mercy was shown by the Texans, for they remembered the red deeds of the Comanches in their own happy homes.

The Ranger captain had raised his revolver to fire again, when, suddenly, he lowered it with the cry:

"That is no Indian, but a white child."

He referred to the little captive.

Little Brave stood in the entrance to the tepee, over the dead bodies of Mad Panther and his squaw. He held an arrow in his bow, as though to fire upon the Ranger captain when he cried:

"It is no red-skin, but a white child!"

Then the Ranger sprung from his horse, and, advancing toward the little captive, said:

"My poor boy, you are their captive no longer, and I will be a father to you until your parents claim you."

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOY'S VOW.

EIGHT years have passed since the attack of the Texan Rangers upon the village of Comanches on Mexican soil, and the scene once raided by the red skins, and which led to the terrible retribution, has prospered under a long peace.

Across a prairie one afternoon a youth was riding slowly, a horse trotting behind him and loaded down with pelts.

The youth was about fourteen years of age, yet his face was so strongly marked with character that he seemed older.

He had a look of thorough manliness, and an air of courage, decision and perfect confidence in himself.

He was well mounted and carried a lariat, in addition to a rifle, pair of revolvers, and hunting-knife.

Dressed in buckskin leggings, he wore a blue woolen shirt and a gray slouch hat pinned up jauntily upon one side.

Little top-boots and spurs completed his costume. He had a pack at the back of his saddle, as though out for a long jaunt, and his horses had the appearance of having traveled far that day.

It was the sunset hour, and his gaze was fixed intently upon a dark smoke which rolled heavenward some miles away among the hill-lands. What did it mean?

As darkness came on the smoke disappeared, and a great red glare appeared in its place.

Then, here and there other red fires were seen, and from the boy's lips came the words:

"The Comanches are raiding the settlement!"

With the words the spurs sunk into the flanks of the horse, and he bounded away at a rapid run, followed by the pack-animal.

On the youth rode, at a swinging gallop, his way now guided by the sight of a score of burning houses, and though the pace of his horses slackened, as they became more and more tired, he did not spare the spur.

Straight toward the spot where the smoke had been seen at sunset, he went, while he could see other fires kindling to the northward, showing where the red fiends were carrying on their work on their retreat, they having struck the lower end of the settlement first.

On, on he sped until his tired horses could hardly go faster than a slow lope.

From the distance came wild yells, and, soon after, shots fired in rapid succession.

"The Rangers are on their track! Bravo! Bravo! Oh! if I was only with them!" cried the youth.

"But I will be, for I shall mount a fresh horse as soon as I get home and follow."

"Home! I fear I have no home now."

"And father, mother, sister, and dear old grandma, what has become of you?"

He dashed a tear from his eyes as he spoke, and once more the cruel howls tore the flanks of his horse.

But, the poor animal could go no faster, and the tired pack-horse only followed because led by the lariat.

At length the youth came to a rise of the prairie, and then hills came into new and timber-lands.

But, on he pushed, his way lighted by the glare of the burning cabins of the settlers.

"Oh, how sorry I am that I left home!"

"But, father wanted the pelts and I had to go after them, as he was ill."

"I hope all is well at home."

Into the hill-lands he had come now, and winding around a trail at the base of a ridge, he suddenly came into view of the home he had left a week before.

Then all had been happiness there, with every evidence of its being the home of some well-to-do settler.

There was a large and commodious cabin, with smaller ones for the hands, and spacious outbuildings.

Fields were there for cultivation, there were large numbers of cattle, horses and sheep, and peace and plenty rested upon all.

But, how changed the scene from the past and the present!

Now the great cabin and outbuildings were masses of living coals; the fences were down; the cattle run off, and the firelight showed a fearful desolation upon all.

A large dog stood near the ruins howling dimly, and he alone was all the youth beheld about the place.

On he rode, straight for the burning building,

to suddenly draw rein when a hundred feet away.

From his saddle he sprung, and then advanced with quick step nearer.

But he stopped suddenly, and instinctively took off his hat.

His eyes had fallen upon some of those who had dwelt there in that once happy home.

There lay the form of the settler, dead. He had been torn from a sick bed and put to death.

Nor was this all.

Near him lay the white-haired woman whom the youth had called grandma.

The boy was calm now—too calm for one of his years, gazing upon such a scene as he now beheld.

Over among a bed of flowers lay another form, and from the boy's lips came the one word:

"Sister!"

She, too, was dead—a young girl just across the threshold of womanhood, and from her blonde hair a scalp-lock had been torn, as also from the heads of the other victims of the Comanches' cruel vengeance.

On, still further, the last one of the household was found—the settler's wife.

On tiptoe the boy went from dead to dead, his head uncovered, while only a moan would come from his pallid lips.

Still further on, lying here and there, were several others, the slain people of the ranch.

The Comanches had done their fiends' work only too well, and few had escaped.

The home of Captain Redfern the Ranger chief had been the first one the human tigers had struck, and from their hiding-place in the timber they had swooped down upon their victims.

Other settlers had been partially warned, but the red wave of horsemen had swept on, killing and burning as they went.

And to the ears of the boy came the distant sound of fighting, the yells of the savages, the cheers of the Rangers.

And then down upon his knees amid the scene of ruin and death dropped the boy, while from his lips came a vow to claim lives tenfold for every one of those so dear to him whom the Comanches had that night slain.

And as he rose, perfectly calm now, a wild neigh was heard and a splendid horse came dashing toward him.

"My own good horse!" cried the boy exultantly, and at his call the horse came toward him.

It was but a few minutes' work to throw his saddle and bridle upon him, and then away dashed Roy Redfern on the track of the Comanches.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

NEIL BURT, the driver of the coach whose terminus was Devil's Ranch, in the mines of New Mexico, and his pard and alternate, Mexican Joe, had a hard struggle to keep alive.

They were both of them splendid drivers, fearless men, and they had a run to go over twice a week that few men would dare venture upon.

Devil's Ranch was as wicked a community as could be found upon the frontier, from the mouth of the Rio Grande to Salt Lake, and that was saying a great deal.

There was more actual devilry there to the square inch than most localities could show to the square mile of territories.

Honest miners in the minority, alleged miners, and desperadoes of all kinds were there and death was a daily visitor to the place.

This was the terminus of the coach run as I have said, and the trail ran eastward, *via* Fort Blanco, when there was a passenger or freight for that outpost, otherwise along a valley a couple of miles from it, and thus on to branch coach trails, or roads.

There were road-agents along the way to hold up the coach and rob the passengers, and the trail was such a dangerous one in places that few cared to travel it by night, as the danger of going over a precipice was about equal to being killed by outlaws.

But Neil Burt and Mexican Joe drove it semi-weekly, and though often held up by Blue Jacket Bill and his band of outlaws, they continued to go on their way in spite of the perils they encountered.

Fort Blanco was a delightful post to be stationed at, though its commandant had his hands full in looking after red-skins, the citizens of Devil's Ranch and Blue Jacket Bill and his outlaws.

One day the coach was bound westward, on

its way to Devil's Ranch, and Neil Burt was on the box.

There was not a single passenger, and Neil was singing as he drove along.

He had left the fort twenty miles away, and Devil's Ranch was still twenty miles ahead, and it would be night before he reached there.

The road here was not bad, rolling and timbered, and the idea of seeing other than a road-agent there never entered the mind of Neil Burt, and he was not expecting even an outlaw to show himself then.

But could Neil Burt believe his eyes, when they suddenly beheld in the trail ahead a horsewoman?

There she sat quietly upon her horse, a spirited jet-black animal, with silver-mounted bridle and saddle, and champing his bit like a thoroughbred.

The rider was dressed in deep black, wore a heavy sable veil, and gauntlet gloves of the same somber hue.

Her form was upright, and slender, but partially hidden by the long veil which was too thick for Neil Burt to penetrate, keen as were his eyes.

As the coach drew near she held her whip up as though for a signal to halt.

Neil Burt would have done so anyhow, for she was right in the trail, while the appearance of a woman in that lone place so excited his curiosity he would never have gone by without asking a few questions.

"Senor, I would like passage to Devil's Ranch with you, if you please, and at your own terms," she said, in a voice which Neil Burt afterward said was as sweet as a mocking-bird's notes.

She spoke in English but with the sweetest of accents, and Neil Burt at once doffed his sombrero, and with a low bow said:

"With pleasure, miss, and I'll be honored if you will take a seat upon the box with me, though I have no inside passengers, should you wish to be alone," and Neil Burt gave his reins a twist around his lamp and sprang to the ground, his sombrero still in hand.

"Thank you, senor, I will ride on the box with you."

"I can hitch your horse alongside of my leader, lady, and—"

"Thanks, but I will leave my horse here."

"Leave him here, lady?"

"Yes, senor."

She sprang to the ground as she spoke, unbuckled her belt and let fall her long riding skirt, which left her in a full dress of mourning.

This she threw over the horn of her saddle, after taking from where it hung a leather satchel.

Throwing the reins over the horse she then patted her horse affectionately and mounted to the stage box with an ease that surprised Neil Burt.

"I'll hitch your horse, lady."

"No, senor, leave him where he is, please."

"But it is thirty miles nearly to Devil's Ranch you may not know?"

"Yes, senor, my horse will take care of himself."

Neil remounted to his seat, gave a glance at the horse and after making his passenger, whom he felt was beautiful, as comfortable as possible, he drove on.

At a bend in the trail half a mile away he suddenly looked back.

There stood the horse just as he had been left.

"Well, this is a queer go all round."

"I've got to find out who she is and what's her game, or I'm no account as a pump."

So muttered Neil Burt as he gazed at his silent, veiled passenger, and began to meditate just how he should open the conversation, for somehow he stood in awe of the Veiled Lady in Black.

Just then to the surprise of the driver the passenger began the conversation by asking:

"Senor, do you know Blue Jacket Bill the outlaw chief?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS ARRIVAL.

"WELL, yes, lady," answered Neil Burt, "I do know Blue Jacket Bill rather better than I'd like to, for he often meets me on my runs."

"Describe the man, please?"

"That's as hard to do, lady, as to describe you, for he goes masked as completely as you do."

Unheeding this reference to herself, the Veiled Woman asked:

"Is he a large or small man?"

"Tall, splendidly formed, and as fierce as a tiger."

"He has a large band, I believe?"

"Yes, lady."

"It is not known who he is?"

"Not a soul that knows gives it away, lady."

"The New Mexico is your best hotel in Devil's Ranch, is it not, senor?"

"It is the best in this part of the country, lady, and Senor Du Val knows how to run a hash-house."

"Is he a Mexican?"

"Well, he goes for a Mexican, lady; but, somehow, I think he's an American, for he's square clean through, will never pick a row, but is the last man to let go if they jump him."

"Do you know a man in Devil's Ranch by the name of Trent Baxter?"

"The Sharp from Texas, you means, lady?"

"Yes, I believe he also bears that name."

"He is also called the Gambler Sharp, for he plays the best game of keards in the mines."

"You know him well, then?"

"As well as any man does, I guess, lady, and that is saying mighty little, for somehow the Sharp from Texas hain't one to be intimate with any one, unless it be in a fight, and then he gits too darned familiar, begging your pardon, and ther' hain't a man in Devil's Ranch that don't feel a leetle awe of him but one, and he hain't no man, nuther."

"A woman, then?"

"No, lady, though he's handsome as any woman I ever see."

"Who is he, then?"

"A boy, they say, for he don't seem over eighteen, and yet he's man from boots to sombrero, and a dandy, too."

"What did you say his name was?"

"They calls him at the fort Redfern the Scout, and in the mines he is known as the Gold Revolver Sharp, for he allers carries two gold-mounted weepens, and a bowie of the same, while he dresses as fine as a Mexican bull-fighter, and in Mexican togs, too."

"He is a Mexican, then?"

"If he is nobody knows it, lady, for he speaks English like the professor at Fort Blanco, and Spanish just as well."

"What does he claim to be?"

"He makes no claim to be more than Redfern the Scout, and they do say he is the best in these parts, and Buckskin Sam, chief of trailers at the fort, says so himself, he included."

"Then he's the deadeast of dead shots with those gold-mounted revolvers of his, and when he goes for a man in Devil's Ranch that wants to boss the community, he gets him."

"The boy don't know what fear is, for he carries about with him finery enough to tempt Blue Jacket Bill and his gang to kill him, but, somehow, when he gits into a killing game it's the other man turns up his toes."

"Then he is a desperado?"

"Not a bit of it, miss; only the cutest, handsomest lad you ever seen, dressed in velvet and silk, and wearing gold spurs, and a red sombrero, which is embroidered with gold thread."

"He's a boss dandy, is the Gold Revolver Sharp, lady, and when he plays cards, tomp, he wins the pile, though I have never seen him and the Sharp from Texas hitch yet, but I'm a-thinking that some day they may do so."

"Going to stay long in the Ranch, lady?"

"I do not know."

"Maybe you is a Mexican lady, for I observes you has a accent in your talking, though its mighty slight and most pleasing."

"Thank you, senor," and at the reply Neil Burt was sorry he had not halted after asking the question and left off the compliment, for it gave her a chance to thank him instead of replying.

But he opened fire again with:

"You don't scare easy to be alone in this country."

"I am able to protect myself, senor," was the quiet reply and Neil Burt sunk into silence, muttering to himself:

"She beats my time, sart'in."

It was after dark when the lights of Devil's Ranch came in sight.

The veiled passenger gazed at them with deep interest, now and then asking a question, which Neil Burt promptly answered.

"There's the New Mexico Hotel, lady, and it's lighted up big to-night," he said, pointing to a pile of shanties in a group, several of them rising to the height of a second story and surrounded by piazzas.

Soon after the coach drew up before the New Mexico, and Senor Du Val the landlord advanced and met his lady guest, though with an inquiring look at Neil, for it was a very remarkable thing to see a woman in Devil's Ranch.

He conducted her himself to his best room, ordered a special supper for her and returning to the office asked Neil:

"Who is she, Neil?"

"I don't know no more than a fool."

"She told me to register her, as Senora Dolores of Mexico."

"Waal, I didn't know that much, for I couldn't see through that black blanket she wears, and I'm durned if I knows if she's Injun, Mexican or pale-face."

"Why has she come here?"

"I give it up," was the answer of Neil Burt, and so did the landlord, who, though he did look something like a Mexican, and spoke English with a feigned accent, was really an American.

CHAPTER XIX. ON A WOMAN'S TRAIL.

THERE was a world of excitement at Devil's Ranch.

Never in its history had it been so stirred up as by the arrival of the mysterious Vailed Lady who had come in on Neil Burt's coach, and, after creating a great excitement, had as mysteriously departed.

Not a soul had discovered her identity, unless it was one man, Trent Baxter the Sharp from Texas.

To explain and get at bottom facts, I will state that the Vailed Lady in Black, after she had had her supper, sent for the landlord of the New Mexico and told him she was anxious to play cards, if she could find a foe worthy her steel.

As in duty bound he had escorted her to the gambling saloon, which was in full blast, and she had challenged the Sharp from Texas to a game, as she was told he was the best player in the mines.

The Sharp from Texas was a tall man with a superb physique, wore his hair in waving masses far down his back, and his beard full, falling to his belt.

He dressed gorgeously, sported diamonds, wore his revolvers ready for use and was a man to command admiration and induce awe.

He played for stakes no matter how high, and it was seldom he lost, while he had to often offer odds to get partners.

But the Sharp from Texas had not seemed over-anxious to play with the Vailed Lady, yet dared not refuse.

He was asked to name the stakes, but politely left it to the Lady in Black, whose sable veil no eye had yet penetrated.

She had responded that she would play for a stake to remain unknown until one or the other won.

The interest excited by the strange game was too intense for the Sharp from Texas to refuse, and the terms were agreed to.

The game was won by the woman, and then came the startling assertion that the stake she demanded was the life of the Sharp from Texas.

And more, then and there she would have claimed it, had not there appeared upon the scene one bold enough to strike up her revolver and save the gambler from instant death.

That one was Redfern the Scout, or as he was also called, the Scarlet Sombrero, and the Gold Revolver Sharp.

He had demanded a game with the Vailed Lady for stakes he would name, and she had yielded.

Redfern the Scarlet Sombrero had won, and he named the stake that for one year she was not to attempt the life of the Sharp from Texas.

The Vailed Lady turned and left the saloon, the Sharp from Texas quickly quitted the place and Redfern the Scout went to his room in the hotel.

The next morning the Vailed Lady had left the hotel, going as she had come, on Neil Burt's coach.

The Revolver Sharp had followed soon after, and the Sharp from Texas could not be found, and Devil's Ranch was left to talk over the strange happenings.

Several days after when Neil Burt came in on his run, he had something to say of importance.

The story Neil Burt told was that when he had gone a few miles, with the Vailed Lady on the box, he had seen horsemen ahead and told her that Blue Jacket Bill and his band were waiting for them.

"You are mistaken, senor, those men will do you no harm," was the reply.

Upon coming up with the horsemen Neil Burt had discovered that there were quite a number of them, all mounted upon black horses, and that they were masked.

Like trained soldiers they were drawn up on the side of the road, and saluted as the coach came to a halt.

The Vailed Lady had then dropped into Neil Burt's hand a purse heavy with gold, thanked him for his kindness and said:

"I leave you here, senor. Adios!"

Then she had thrown on the long skirt which one of the men handed to her, sprung lightly into the saddle of the horse she had ridden the day before, and with a wave of the hand dashed away out of sight.

Neil Burt was astounded, but drove on, to be halted at the pass known as the Blue Jacket's Toll-Gate, by Blue Jacket Bill himself and a party of his men.

Their first demand had been for the Vailed Lady in Black, and Blue Jacket Bill uttered oaths both loud and deep when he found himself thwarted in his attempt to capture her, and was about to content himself with robbing the coach of what he could find of value, when the clatter of hoofs was heard and the outlaws fled, driven off by Redfern the Scout alone.

He was also surprised to find the Vailed Lady gone, and hearing the story of Neil, had wheeled his horse and gone back on the trail.

"And he's gone on the trail of the Vailed Mystery, I'll bet this purse of gold," said Neil Burt, handing the gift of the woman to Senor Du Val to look at, and adding:

"There's ten golden onzas in there she gave me, landlord, and I does hope the Scarlet Sombrero means her no harm, for she's a lady, and no mistake, if she is on the shoot gambles and hides her face."

CHAPTER XX. REDFERN.

IT was a long time before Redfern the Scout returned to the Devil's Ranch.

The Vailed Lady was still the subject of conversation among the miners, but the excitement of the affair had blown over.

The Sharp from Texas had been seldom seen in the ranch since; and when Redfern arrived it was at night, and he went direct to his room.

Thither Senor Du Val soon followed him, and while the young scout ate the supper sent up to him, the landlord told him of affairs in the mines.

In his description of the youth Neil Burt had not been wrong, for his face was one that might be called beautiful, yet it was stamped with manliness beyond his years.

Perhaps seventeen, he yet might be older, for at times there was nothing boyish in his face.

His remarkable dress, a most gorgeous Mexican suit, and his gold-embroidered red sombrero gave him a picturesque appearance that was most striking.

"Well, Redfern, I must say you are as great a mystery in the mines as is the Vailed Lady, for not a single man would have ever dreamed of your saving the life of the Sharp from Texas, when he is your avowed foe."

The scout smiled at the words of the landlord and said:

"I would not be a mystery, for I am a solver of mysteries, senor."

"Then solve yourself for my benefit, for you know how friendly I feel toward you."

"What would you know about me?"

"Who are you?"

"Roy Redfern."

"True; but Mexican or American?"

"I do not know."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is."

"Don't you remember your childhood?"

"Yes, but too well."

"I recall an Indian massacre of—I do not know whom, for I was in a wagon-train, and all were killed except myself."

"The chief took me captive, carried me to his village, and there I spent years, I do not know how many."

"Then the Texas Rangers attacked the village, and I saw the chief and his wife, who had been kind to me, shot down."

"I then was taken by Captain Redfern the ranger chief, to his home."

"His wife, mother and child were all the family he had, and they adopted me as one of them."

"In fact I loved them as I would my own parents and sister, and they were devoted to me."

"They taught me to read, and, an educated man I learned much from the captain, studying each day with my adopted sister."

"One day when I was about fourteen I went on an errand for my father, who was ill, and when I returned, a week after, I saw my home

in flames, and father, brother, sister and grandmother dead.

"The Comanches had been there."

"Then and there that night I vowed ten-fold revenge, Senor Du Val, and I have kept my vow in the years which have passed since that night of horror."

"I joined the Rangers, and we recaptured the stock, regained the booty, and the settlers built my home up again for me."

"But I left it in good hands and went on the Comanche trail six months of each year."

"I warned the fort of danger to a wagon-train, and so got an appointment there as scout."

"You have heard that I always take a scalp when I kill an Indian."

"It is true, for I do, and they keep my count of tenfold lives, for those four dear ones slain."

"I have completed my string now, and kept my vow, and when I have run down Blue Jacket Bill and his band, I shall go to Mexico to live."

"To Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Why there, Redfern?" After a silence of some minutes the youth answered

"I'll tell you frankly."

"I saved Trent Baxter from death because I am not ready to see him die yet."

"I saw the Vailed Lady here in the hotel, after our meeting in the Gambling Hall, and do you know I was so strangely drawn toward her that I made up my mind to solve the mystery regarding her."

"So I took her trail."

"So Neil Burt said."

"She was met on the coach trail by a party of masked horsemen, and I followed them."

"Others joined her at the Rio Grande, and crossing I followed until I came to her home, a fort-like hacienda where only one of great wealth could live, for she has a hundred people fully about her, and cattle and horses in untold numbers."

"I was halted by guards, refused permission to see her, but getting a hint that a messenger was expected from the Government to her, I ambushed him, took his uniform, leaving him bound and in hiding, and thus gained entrance to the presence of this most mysterious woman."

"Was she still masked?"

"Yes, she wore her veil, and, recognizing me, I told her what I had done to see her."

"I could not tell her why, and yet she asked me much about myself, and was most kind to me."

"She gave me this pin to wear, and told me it might serve me well some day, and would gain me admission to her presence when I came again, for I pledged myself to hunt down for her Blue Jacket Bill."

The landlord took the pin, a solid gold one, representing a human eye.

Upon one side, for it worked on a swivel, was a black eye represented by a dark onyx center, diamond pupil and pearls.

Upon the reverse was a blue eye, with turquoise in the place of the onyx.

"This is a wonderful pin, and one of rare value, Redfern," said the landlord.

"Yes, and one I appreciate most highly."

"But now let me tell you, senor, that when I have kept my pledge I shall return to the home of the Vailed Lady, that mysterious woman of Mexico."

"She has told me to come to her, to be as a son to her, and somehow the longing is upon me to go, and I will."

"I think you are wise, I must say, for she is no ordinary woman."

"No, for she holds the rank of a captain of Lancers in the Mexican Army, and is known as the Lady Captain, in command of an outpost, her home."

"And you did not see her unveiled?"

"I did not."

"Strange."

"No, for I think she must be under some vow to keep veiled."

"And she hates Trent Baxter?"

"With the deadliest hatred, for she knows that he is not what he pretends to be."

"But just what he is I shall one day know, senor, was the firm reply of the young scout."

CHAPTER XXI.

AS A SCOUT-DETECTIVE.

THE commandant of Fort Blanco, at the time of which I write, was Colonel Martyn Rockwood, a handsome man, a dashing cavalry soldier, and a genial gentleman, popular with officers and men alike who were under him.

Since his assuming command matters had been more peaceful than before in the district.

he commanded; the Blue Jackets had been hunted down and the red-skins held in check, while the turbulent spirits at Devil's Ranch had been dealt some very severe and salutary lessons.

Redfern, the Scout, had resigned, after the wiping out of the Blue Jackets, and had gone to Mexico.

But the colonel held his pledge to return should he require his aid.

And so Colonel Rockwood, requiring the aid of the young scout, had put him to the test, and written for him to come.

"Mr. Redfern, the Scout, sir," said the orderly, as the colonel sat in his quarters one night, nearly a year after the visit of the Vailed Lady of Mexico to the Devil's Ranch.

Colonel Rockwood uttered an expression of pleasure, and said quickly:

"Show him in at once, orderly."

A moment after Redfern entered.

He was dressed if anything more elegantly than ever, and his bright-red gold-embroidered sombrero looked very beautiful as the lamplight flashed upon it.

He was given a cordial greeting, told to be seated, and then the colonel said:

"Now, Redfern, I wish to make known to you that the man you tracked to Colorado, and the Vigilantes hanged there, was not Blue Jacket Bill, the outlaw chief."

"I am aware of the fact, Colonel Rockwood, and I was on my way here to hunt down the right man, when I got your letter asking me to come."

"To explain, sir, I met on my way hither a young miner from Colorado, who was one of the Vigilantes that hanged the man, who was strung up upon my say so that he was Blue Jacket Bill, and I believed that I was right, for I did not understand how the man could bear the same mark he did, of one black and one blue eye."

"Indeed! and Blue Jacket Bill is so marked?"

"Yes, sir, as is also the man the Vigilantes hanged."

"This is marvelous."

"Well, Colonel Rockwood, it is equally marvelous that the young miner I referred to as a Vigilante, had his doubts, went back, cut down the man, brought him back to life after hard work, and went to his home with him."

"He found him to be a well-to-do settler, and his name was Trent Baxter, which name Blue Jacket Bill claimed when a gambler in Devil's Ranch."

"The settler told the miner, whose name is Lariat Dick, how the outlaw, whom he had befriended in the past, had taken his name and defrauded him, doing him much harm."

"Lariat Dick had arrived with the settler just in time to rescue Ruth, the settler's daughter, from this same man, still claiming the name of the benefactor he had wronged, still dogging his steps to further do him harm."

"The man escaped from Lariat Dick, whom he afterward ambushed, robbed and left for dead, and the young miner came to seek me and tell me that Blue Jacket Bill was still alive, and now we are leagued to hunt him down together."

"This same man, Colonel Rockwood, who calls himself Trent Baxter, and is known as the Sharp from Texas, I know now to have been in Devil's Ranch disguised as a parson."

"I know that he killed another benefactor, Miner Gray St. John in his cabin, and I believe is now going to the home of his victim to profess friendship and wrong his wife and daughter out of their fortune."

"I was told by Miner Gray St. John something of his wife, and how when a youth, his rival Hugh Hammond had fought a duel with him, having first in some way extracted the bullet from his, St. John's rifle."

"He fled, after robbing his father, a prominent man, and was supposed to have been lost at sea."

"But Miner St. John showed me a photograph of his rival and foe, and I am sure that Blue Jacket Bill is his old enemy Hugh Hammond."

"Miner St. John always felt a dread of losing his life at the hands of this man Hammond, and yet, though befriending him in his cabin, failed to recognize him as I did; but then experience has taught me to read the human face well."

"Now, Colonel Rockwood, I am going to take the trail of Blue Jacket Bill and follow it to the end, and Lariat Dick goes with me."

"When the end comes the man who is hanged this time will not be the wrong one, I pledge you my word."

"And somehow, Redfern, I feel that you will keep your pledge, for I have the utmost confi-

dence in your ability to do so," was the response of the gallant colonel.

Soon after he added:

"If you run this man to earth, this arch villain whose villainies we do not know the half of I am sure, I will promise you that there will be no trouble in securing you from the President a second lieutenantancy in the army, won on merit alone."

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE PROTECTOR.

A SMALL party of trailers had dared venture out from San Antonio, Texas, in the face of perils against which they had been warned.

Though together, the party was distinctly divided.

One division was a settler and his family, venturing toward a settlement where he was to make a new home.

For company and mutual protection he had joined in with the others, consisting of one elderly gentleman and two ladies.

There was not a large wagon-train going through for some time, so the parties would not wait, and so ventured.

There was a driver of the gentleman's ambulance, and who also acted as cook, and a guide and hunter, and such was the small force that made the venture in the face of hardships and dangers.

One of the ladies possessed a sadly beautiful face, and was yet in her thirties.

This one the gentleman addressed as Mrs. St. John, and she appeared to be in bad health, for she was racked by a severe cough and was far from strong.

The other lady was a young girl of fifteen, strangely like her mother and very lovely in face, while her form was slender and graceful.

This one the white-haired gentleman addressed as Ethel.

The ambulance was a very large one, drawn by two strong mules, and it was water-proof and arranged with every degree of comfort that could be thought of.

It was devoted wholly to the use of the two ladies.

The gentleman rode on horseback, and there were led horses along for the two ladies.

A tent they also had, and the trip, under other circumstances would not have been an unpleasant one.

There were provisions in plenty, a good cook, and the hunter and guide supplied them with fresh game each day.

Both ladies were dressed in mourning, and there were the traces of grief upon their faces which the change of scene did not drive away.

"Had I known, Mr. Baxter, that the journey was to have been such a severe one, I would never have undertaken it," said Mrs. St. John as she sat with her daughter and their protector one evening in camp, after having been some days on the march.

"I did not wish to discourage you, my dear Mrs. St. John, for fear you would be tempted not to take the journey, and your presence in the mines is necessary absolutely to secure for you full claim upon your husband's property," answered Mr. Baxter, carefully wiping the glasses of his massive gold spectacles and replacing them upon his head.

"I almost feel tempted to let it go, for with what my poor murdered husband placed in the bank to the credit of both Ethel and myself, and has to his own credit, which is, of course, ours, we have ample fortune."

"Yes, Mr. Baxter, I would rather lose it than have mother suffer more," Ethel said.

"But the mine is worth far more than the three bank accounts, I assure you, my dear ladies, and it will only be a few more days of hardship to stand, while we could not return alone over our trail, as it would be far too dangerous to think of."

"Well, it is our only course, I fear; but I wish we could give you authority to act for us."

"That might have been done back in San Antonio, or at your home in Baltimore, Mrs. St. John, but it is not possible here to draw up legal papers."

"I wish you had thought of it, sir, before we left home."

"I did, but then it was a very delicate suggestion for me to make, to place your fortune in my hands."

"My husband trusted you so implicitly, Mr. Baxter, and you were such a true, noble friend of his, I feel that you would have acted for our good in all things."

"Certainly, Mrs. St. John, as I am doing

now," and soon after the man arose and left the ladies to retire.

Going to the camp-fire where sat the hunter and guide smoking, he sat down and said:

"When will we reach the last camp of the train?"

"In three nights, pard."

"You are sure that your friends will be there?"

"They never fail whar there is money to pick up, pard."

"There must be no mistake."

"There won't be."

"You will of course see one of them on the trail, guide, the day we reach the place?"

"Yas, cap'n, and if you go with me you kin talk it all over with him and have no hitch in the perceedin's."

"Yes, I can go on a hunt that afternoon, and we can meet on the trail ahead."

"Jist so, pard."

"There must be no hitch, no mistake, if you expect to get your money for your work."

"All will be serene, cap'n, for we arranged it all so as to have no hitch."

"Don't you worry, for the thing is fixed to please yer."

There must be the same number left on the scene as we have in the outfit, you know."

"Thar must be, and thar will, for thet was in ther papers, and Bricktop Jack hain't going to have no mistake, if he has ter kill Comanches ter fill in the gap, pickin' 'em off in the fracas, and makin' t'others believe they was kilt by the defenders."

"I tells yer, cap'n, all will go serene."

"It must!" was the decided response of the old gentleman, and he retired to his little "A" tent and sought his blankets for the night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TREACHERY.

THE third day from the camp, when the foregoing strange conversation was held between the old gentleman and his guide and hunter, a man sat on a fallen tree in a timber motte, as though waiting for some one.

His horse cropped grass near, and ever and anon the man would rise and glance out over the prairie.

At last he cried, with evident pleasure at the discovery:

"There he comes!"

The man resumed his seat to await the coming of a horseman who had appeared over a distant rise in the prairie.

The one who waited was a hard-faced villain, if looks go for anything, and they do in nine cases out of ten.

His hair was long and fiery red, his short beard the same hue, and his eyes deep-set, very black and cunning.

He was roughly dressed but splendidly armed.

The one who was approaching was the guide of the little party who had ventured upon the trail in the face of all dangers.

His face was by no means attractive, but it was his knowledge of prairie craft that had gained him his position, not his good looks.

"Ho, Trailer Tom, you is here arter all," cried the red-headed man.

"You bet I keeps a promise, Bricktop Jack, when there is gold to be made."

"Waal, what's been done?" and Trailer Tom dismounted and allowed his horse to feed near, while he sat down upon the log.

"All has been did, and ther reds is not over fifteen mile away."

"Who is they?"

"Black Bear's band o' Comanches."

"They is good ones fer ther work, and strong enough."

"Thar is forty of 'em."

"They'll do; but there is ter be some of 'em kilt ef they sh'd'n't be by ther settler."

"I knows, fer as I understands ther racket, yer wants ther same number o' bodies found, if thar should be any trailers on yer track, as thar is in ther outfit."

"Adzactly, we must leave jist so many dead folks, and they is ter be gnawed by coyotes and spoilt so as not ter be know'd, yer know, from them as forms the outfit."

"But thar is three in ther lay-out that is not ter die."

"Yas, more than that, fer me and Ben counts fer somethin', I guesses."

"Yas, so thar is ter be five."

"Jist so."

"And five bodies, is ter be found ter make up."

"Jist so."
 "Two of 'em is women?"
 "Yas."
 "Waal, ef I hain't in luck I never was afore."
 "How so?"
 "Yer see I come across, some six mile away from here, a place whar thar had been a big camp."

"They was goin' to the Red Valley settlement, I guesses, for they come down on ther up-trail across the river."

"They also had a hot fight only two nights ago with Black Bear, and beat him off; but thar was a woman and a young gal kilt, along with half a dozen men of ther train."

"Waal?"

"Now I are a inquisitive cuss, and so I jist digs fer curiosity ter see if thar were anything o' value put in by mistake, and so I comes across the woman and the gal, and t'other dead folks."

"Yas."

"You say thar is a woman and a gal ter escape?"

"Yas."

"Along with you, Buck, and a gent?"

"Yas."

"He's ther one who puts up ther dust?"

"He be."

"Waal, them graves over on the river will furnish the women folks and men who is ter be left in ther camp with them as is ter be really kilt."

"When was they kilt?"

"Two nights ago."

"Then they'll do, so jist git yer pard and dig em up, and have 'em near our camp fer ter-nite."

"I'll do it; but what about ther gent and ther woman as gits away?"

"Waal, you and your pard, me and Buck, is ter be ther guard for them wherever the gent wants ter go, but we is not ter show ourselves, only be near, if wanted, followin' tha'r trail."

"What are ther gent up ter, pard?"

"Lord knows, but he's no fool."

"I guesses not."

"Here he comes now, for I told him I'd be here ter meet you, and he'd better come and talk it all over, as he wants no hitch about it."

As Trailer Tom spoke a horseman appeared in sight.

It was Mr. Baxter, the gray-haired protector of the ladies.

"He's a old one, Tom, ter be in deviltry."

"He oughter be thinkin' o' prayer and ther grave," said Bricktop Jack as Baxter came in sight.

"My opinion are thet he hain't so old as he looks and makes out, pard."

"But I'll interdooce yer," and as Baxter rode up and dismounted, Trailer Tom continued:

"Cap'n, this are my pard, and he hev got things fixed jist prime."

"Yes, there must be no mistake," was Baxter's stern response.

"Thar hain't a goin' ter be, cap'n, as yer will say when yer hears thet song my pard here has ter sing."

"He hev Black Bear and his band of Comanches, thet same Black Bear bein' a renegade white man, cap'n, and all ther stiff's wanted is already supplied, so yer see things is goin' jist right."

"It must be so," and Baxter then listened to the whole plan, his face flushing with pleasure as he heard how complete all was.

Then he mounted his horse and rode off again to find some game with which he could join the little party later in the day.

"Even that young fiend, Redfern, cannot follow my trail beyond to-night's camp, if, as I believe, he is on my track," muttered the man as he came in sight of the little train he was leading to its doom at the next camping-place.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LONE SCOUT.

COLONEL ROCKWOOD was just preparing to retire for the night when word came that Redfern the Scout had entered the fort and wished to see him if possible.

"Admit him, immediately," was the colonel's command, and when the youth entered he was not alone, for his companion was Lariat Dick.

They were travel-stained and weary looking, and when they had taken the seats the colonel motioned them to, he asked:

"Well, you look as though you had news, Redfern?"

"I have, sir, and sad news it is, though I have the satisfaction of reporting that at last Blue Jacket Bill is in his grave."

"Bravo!" cried the colonel, almost excitedly.

"When was he hanged?"

"He was not hanged, sir, but murdered by Comanches."

"What a pity; but how was it?"

"I will have to begin at the beginning, sir, since we left here."

"Do so."

"We took his trail, sir, at Blue Jackets' Toll-Gate, and followed it until we struck a branch stage trail, when he sold his horse at a station and took the east-bound coach."

"Just as you feared."

"Yes, sir; but trailing on coaches, railroads and through towns is slow work, compared to prairie and mountain tracking, so it was weeks before we reached the home of Widow St. John and her daughter in the outskirts of Baltimore."

"It had been sold only a short while ago, and the ladies had started for the West, we learned, with an elderly gentleman."

"An elderly gentleman?"

"Yes, sir; none other than Blue Jacket Bill in a wig of white hair and gold spectacles."

"The fiend!"

"You will say more than that, colonel, when you know all."

"I am most anxious to learn all."

"We again began to trail, sir, and tracked them to New Orleans."

"South they went then?"

"Yes, sir, and remained there some days, and then took steamer for Galveston, going from there to San Antonio."

"It strikes me, Redfern, that you are as good a detective as you are a scout."

"Thank you, sir! but I had Lariat Dick's help you know," was the modest reply.

"Pray go on with your story."

"We reached San Antonio, Colonel Rockwood, to find that as there was no wagon-train northward for some time, the man had prevailed upon a settler to join him, and with a hunter and a guide had started in spite of the danger, some time before our arrival."

"With the wagons of the settler and the ambulance and horses we had no trouble following the trail and began to rapidly overhaul them."

"But we were more than a week too late, and yet we could not have moved any quicker from the time of our leaving here."

"I can well believe that."

"We came upon their last camp, in a pretty motte, and there were the ashes of the vehicles, and the appalling sight of the bodies of every one of the little party, for we knew the number."

"The time that had passed, and the coyotes had disfigured the bodies almost beyond recognition, but we found the clothing of the ladies, the white wig and gold spectacles of Blue Jacket Bill, and enough to convince us that the Comanches had done their awful work but too well."

"My God! this is fearful," cried Colonel Rockwood, with deep feeling.

"It unmanned us, sir, for the while; but we buried the bodies and then came on our way, sir, to report to you."

"You did right, Redfern! but to think that when that fiend incarnate met his end he should carry out of life so many innocent souls."

For a long while they talked over the sad affair, after which Redfern and Lariat Dick sought the quarters assigned to them.

After breakfast the next morning a soldier came to Redfern with the information that a man had arrived who wished to see the men whose trail he had followed from the lower country.

The stranger entered and both he and Redfern at once recognized each other, for the man was a scout in the service of the Vailed Lady of Mexico.

"Ah, senor, I did not expect to find it was your trail I was following; but I came on here to make a report of a strange discovery I had made, and seek the aid of the commandant in aiding two unfortunate women, who are in the power of the man you know as Blue Jacket Bill."

Redfern sprung to his feet with a cry, and said:

"Quick, Benson, tell me what you know?"

"Well, senor, I was scouting on my own hook, for I left Mexico, you know, some time ago, and I came upon Black Bear, that renegade white man and his band."

"I laid low and watched, for I knew they were up to some deviltry."

"Two days after I was hiding in some timber when a horseman came there whom I knew as Bricktop Jack, a great rascal."

"I kept in hiding and he was joined by a man I did not know."

"I could not hear what they said, but soon after a third horseman appeared, a man well dressed, and with white hair and gold spectacles."

"After a long talk they separated, going different ways, and I moved off too, over to a ridge where I had left my horse."

"That night I heard firing, and mounting and riding in the direction I saw that it was in the timber where I had been."

"I knew then that a train had been treacherously led into a trap set by Black Bear the renegade."

"I kept a long way off, and saw them burn the wagons and the Indians ride away."

"In the morning I visited the scene and saw the work of the red devils."

"I took their trail at once, and after following it for some time, came to where a small trail branched off."

"There were eight horses in this, and I followed."

"I came to their camp at night, and creeping near, saw that there were two camps, neither one in sight of the other."

"In one was a man, the one with gray hair and spectacles, and two ladies."

"In the other were four men, Bricktop Jack and his party."

"I knew the only way they could take from there, so went ahead and lay in hiding."

"The man and the two ladies, with a led pack-horse, passed, and a mile in their rear followed the four men, evidently a guard, but seeking to remain unseen by the ladies."

"I determined to see the upshot of this strange maneuvering, and so kept on the trail for a couple of days, until I tracked the party to an old, deserted mining-camp."

"Then I took the back track, passed the scene of massacre, but noticing your trail, and that the dead were buried, I followed it on to the fort."

"Are you too tired to take to the trail within the hour, Benson?" asked Redfern.

"At once, if you say so, senor."

"Well, I will have a talk with Colonel Rockwood, and then we will start for Devil's Ranch, for I can find there, as miners, over a dozen of the people of the Vailed Lady of Mexico, and they will follow my lead."

"Now to see the colonel, and then to take the trail once more of Blue Jacket Bill."

Half an hour after, mounted upon fresh horses, Redfern, Lariat Dick and Benson rode away from the fort.

CHAPTER XXV.

THEY MEET.

In an old mining-camp, in a cabin which had once been the "hotel" of the place, sat two persons whom the reader has met before.

One was Mrs. St. John, once known as Ethel Enders, and who had married the youth whom his rival Hugh Hammond had nearly given his mortal wound.

The other was Ethel her daughter.

At last their eyes were opening to the truth, that their proffered friend, Trent Baxter was not all that he seemed.

They had escaped the massacre in the camp by Black Bear, by the courage of Baxter as they were led to believe, and he had led them for days until they had reached the deserted mining-camp.

But Ethel had seen him several times drop back on the trail and meet some one, and of this he had not spoken, and then too she had observed him after reaching the camp, in conversation with several rough men.

She had asked him if others were there and he had replied in the negative, and now mother and daughter began to fear that all was not right, for they had both discovered that his white hair was a wig.

The mother had not broken down as Ethel had feared she would, but seemed to gain strength, now that other danger threatened them, and they determined to pretend not to suspect the man but to watch him closely.

And this they did, Ethel, after they were supposed to have retired for the night, slipping out of the cabin, and creeping to the one near by where Trent Baxter had his quarters.

To her surprise there were four men in there with him, and what she heard caused her to turn deadly pale and tremble violently.

Baxter was speaking and she heard him say:

"Men, the old lady can't last long with exposure and hardship, and then the girl will become my wife. Once she is, I can get hold of her fortune, and it is great, as I know. You stick by me, and I'll pay you well. Two of you

can go to the nearest camps for provisions, and bring them back, and I'll stay here to guard the girl and wait until the old lady dies.

"I loved her some twenty years ago, but I'll transfer my affections to her daughter now," and the man laughed in a cruel way.

Ethel cared to hear no more, but returned and told her mother all.

Mrs. St. John grew stronger in face of the danger that threatened, and said:

"I will not die, my child, for now I know that man at last."

"His face has haunted me, and if I am right he has deceived your poor father as he has me—yes, I believe, Ethel, that he is the murderer of your father—he is Hugh Hammond."

"Await until to-morrow and note closely if his right eye is not a black one, his left eye blue."

"I will, mother, and if so, when those two men go, we can escape to-morrow night, for he said there was a good trail from here to a mining camp some thirty miles away, and we will claim the protection of the honest miners."

"We can take all the horses, so they cannot follow us, and push along the trail, which the animals will follow, I know."

"Yes, my child, we will do so; but remember, we must be just the same as ever to him."

So it was arranged, and the next morning mother and daughter treated the traitor just as sweetly as ever, though it cut them to the heart to do so.

Mrs. St. John pretended to be quite ill in the afternoon and Ethel went out to gather her some wild flowers, she said, but in reality to note the situation of affairs.

She saw where the horses were kept, and that they could go from there down the trail spoken of.

Then she noted the camp of the two men over in a glen, and saw that there were but two horses, which proved that the other two had gone after provisions.

After their frugal supper the mother and daughter pretended to retire early, and Hugh Hammond, for his black and blue eye had betrayed him as such, went to his cabin and began to play cards with Trailer Tom and Bricktop Jack.

Then the mother and daughter crept from their cabin, sought the horses, and saddling their own, led the pack-animal and the steed of the outlaw after them.

They dared not go to get the horses of the other two men, so struck out in the darkness on the trail which Ethel had noted in the afternoon.

For several miles they went along until they came to a surging stream.

They dared not cross it in the night, so felt that they must await the dawn.

They argued that the outlaws would not awaken before dawn, and perhaps not discover their absence until some time after, so they would have a fair start.

So they baited and sought out a resting-place near, holding the stake-ropes of their horses in their hands.

At dawn they arose, crossed the river, and reaching the other shore, found themselves surrounded by a dozen horsemen, dressed in Mexican costume and wearing scarlet sombreros.

A youth stepped forward quickly, and said as he doffed his sombrero:

"Have no fear, ladies, for we were upon your trail, knowing that you were in the power of an outlaw known as Blue Jacket Bill."

"If you are Mrs. and Miss St. John I may be known to you through Miner Gray St. John's letters as Redfern the Scout."

Words cannot express what followed, and Ethel quickly told their story, which was listened to with deepest interest by Redfern, Lariat Dick, Benson, and the half-score Red Hat Rangers of the Vailed Lady of Mexico.

"We will await them here," said Redfern, and the Red Hats went into ambush.

They had not long to wait, for soon Blue Jacket Bill appeared coming at a gallop, and following were Bricktop Jack and Trailer Tom, riding double.

Into the stream they plunged, and as the outlaw chief neared the other shore a lariat encircled his head, and he was dragged from his saddle into the water, and thence ashore.

At the same time the Red Hat Rangers spurred into the stream from their ambush and captured the other two outlaws.

Unable to offer resistance, captured as he was by Redfern's lariat, and dragged through the water, Blue Jacket Bill was seized and bound.

Then came the order from Redfern:

"Men, throw a lariat over that limb, for he has just ten minutes to live."

"This time there shall be no mistake."

"And the others, captain?" asked one of the Red Hat Rangers.

"Must hang with him."

"You, Benson, lead the ladies yonder out of sight."

"Do you intend to carry out your threat, Redfern?" asked the outlaw chief, who was now calm, but very pale.

"I do."

"Will nothing change your determination?"

"Nothing."

"Not even if I was your father?"

"No, I would hang my own father if he were such a man as you are, for I know all your crime-stained career, Hugh Hammond."

"All?" sneered the outlaw.

"Yes, all."

"I am sure that you do not, so I will strike at you yet."

"Have you a piece of paper and a pencil?"

"Yes, pen and ink if you wish."

"So much the better."

"But will you pledge yourself to give the paper unread, to the one to whom it is addressed?"

"I will."

"You mean it?"

"I do."

The outlaw smiled, and paper, pen and ink having been given to him by one of the Red Hat Rangers, he wrote in a bold hand for several minutes.

Then he folded it up and addressed it, while he said:

"I will die with this in my hand."

"When I am dead take this paper, and unread, give it to the one to whom it is addressed."

"I will do so," was the reply.

"Then I am ready."

"Have you no confession to make?"

"None, for you know me as Hugh Hammond, alias Trent Baxter, alias the Sharp from Texas, and last as Blue Jacket Bill."

"What more need I say?"

"That is enough; but I will give you time to make your peace with Heaven."

"Thank you, no, it would do no good."

"I am ready!"

"Swing him up, Rangers!" came the stern order from Redfern, and the outlaw chief was dragged up into mid-air, while the other two outlaws quickly followed.

When dead they were buried upon the banks of the stream and then the party went into camp within sight of their graves.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

FROM the spot where Blue Jacket Bill at last met his fate, the Red Hat Rangers, escorting Mrs. St. John and Ethel went on their way to Devil's Ranch, where the mother and daughter were given the best quarters in the New Mexico Hotel by the delighted landlord.

Leaving them there to claim the mine of Gray St. John and place its management in honest hands, Redfern and Lariat Dick went to Fort Blanco and after hearing the story of the Red Hat Rangers, Colonel Rockwood no longer doubted that at last Blue Jacket Bill had met his fate.

While Lariat Dick returned to the home of Settler Trent Baxter, to tell the story, Redfern went back to the mines and from thence to Mexico to deliver the last message of the dead outlaw chief as he had promised.

He was welcomed warmly by the Vailed Lady, and after telling his story, handed to her the paper given him by Hugh Hammond.

She read it and uttered a low cry, while Redfern heard the words:

"A cruel, but a just retribution!"

Then she swooned.

Calling for the maid of Dolores, Redfern seized the paper and read it.

It was as follows:

"DOLORES:—

"I have been captured by my own son, and he will give the order to hang me."

"He does not know me as his father, but I know him as my son, for the man, Felipe Soto, whom I hired to kill him, kidnapped him instead, and a strange life has been his."

"This is my revenge, that I die by my son's hand."

"HUGH HAMMOND."

Thus did Redfern know the terrible secret; but heided in restoring his mother to consciousness, and then said softly:

"It was a just retribution, my mother."

"Cast the past utterly from your heart, as I will, and happiness will come to us in the future."

"I will," was the low reply, and Dolores kept her word, as much as lay in her power.

She was made happy in the future, when her son, who still kept the name of his adopted father, led to the altar Ethel St. John, whose mother's life had passed away among the mines, and who found her last resting-place by the side of her murdered husband.

As though to escape the memories of the bitter past, Dolores sold out the estates in Mexico, and became an American, purchasing a grand old house in California, where she, her son and daughter still live, and where no one knows the son as Redfern the Red Sombrero Ranger, or the other as the Vailed Mystery of Mexico.

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